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**a journal on video games,
value and meaning**

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WELL PLAYED

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A Journal on Video Games, Values, and Meaning

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A NARRATIVE DREAM: THE UNFINISHED SWAN

By Eric Guadara

Introduction

I earned my undergraduate degree in English, Creative Writing, and Film Studies, so I have a background that nurtures my naturally analytical brain. I can't read a book without a pencil in hand, and I've even watched movies with pen and paper blazing. It is with this background that I tend to approach video games. One game I have been meaning to write about since its release is *The Unfinished Swan* by Giant Sparrow. From chapter to chapter, *The Unfinished Swan* weaves a compelling narrative by taking the player's hand and guiding him/her through consistently unfamiliar territory. Themes, allusions, and symbols are plentiful throughout, emphasizing the natural wonderment felt by the player and bolstering the experience with rich content. I've chosen to break up my writings into chapters to parallel the game's structure/narrative. As a warning, major plot beats will be discussed openly. *The Unfinished Swan* is a game that partially hinges on the player feeling lost and discovering her way. Therefore, the game's narrative is less effective when the player knows where to go, what to do, etc.

Chapter One – Discovery



Figure 1. T...

The “Play” button on the title screen opens a big white book, immediately hinting at the fact that this is going to be a narrative-driven experience. *The Unfinished Swan* begins with an introductory chunk of animated story-telling, narrated by a female’s voice. Monroe, a young child with blonde hair, is sent to an orphanage after his mother passes away. Of the 300 unfinished canvases she left behind, Monroe elected to take one: the painting of an unfinished swan. This is the first symbol the player comes across. Besides for launching Giant Sparrow’s bird-themed titles trend (see: *What Remains of Edith Finch*), a swan is a common symbol for beauty. The bird in *The Ugly Duckling* is initially perceived to be a turkey until it hatches, at which point it is described as being “...very large and very ugly” (Andersen). After an infancy of persecution, the duck eventually sees itself as “...no longer a clumsy dark-gray bird, ugly and hateful to look at, but a – swan!” (Andersen). The bird that had undergone sustained bullying throughout its life is shaped into a beautiful, respected creature. Monroe’s childhood – or the childhood of any orphan – is presumably difficult. It also contains a relative lack of affecting parental expectations. For Monroe, who does not know who his father is, there is no feeling of “when I grow up, I’m going to be like my dad.” The closest he

has to this feeling is that his mother was a painter. An unfinished painting can then represent an unfinished realization of an idea, or in this case, a person. Growing up fatherless then having his mother pass away undoubtedly leaves Monroe feeling unfinished. One night, he wakes to find his mother's painting missing. Also, there's a door he had never seen before. Monroe takes his mother's paintbrush – a symbol in it of itself – and treks down the proverbial rabbit hole to discovery.

An immersive technique that *The Unfinished Swan* makes use of flawlessly is the seamless transition from narration to playing. As the narrator's voice fades, the entire screen is white excepting a small, barely visible reticle in the center. The lack of action forces the player to think, "am I... am I playing right now?" After a few seconds of waiting, the next natural step is impatience, which leads to button pressing. It doesn't take long before the player presses a shoulder button, which, in this case, elicits a veritable mind explosion response. For a new player, the initial paint splatter is wonderful. The game's objective is blissfully unclear. The world itself is disconcertingly white; a blank canvas upon which the player is encouraged to paint if he wishes to progress.



Figure 2. A Blank Canvas.

Games often include trial and error, but few make use of players' innate discovery drive as deftly as *The Unfinished Swan*. Painting The Garden (chapter one's title) can represent Monroe's painting of his own identity. Without societal or parental constraints, his identity is utterly blank. Tossing paint at a canvas to see what sticks is an effective way to experiment what makes up that complex idea of the self. The old adage of "you are what you do" holds humorously true in today's society. I dread updating my Twitter profile because it only allows for 160 characters, a dreadfully low number to describe any human. How can I fit all that I do – write, read, study, design, make, laugh, love, debate, cook – into such a short space? In *The Unfinished Swan*, Monroe is figuring out what he is going to do. A good start is to figure out where he is going to go.

The game is played in the first-person perspective, meaning the player is cast in the role of a young male orphan – not a typical 'good hero vs. bad guys' narrative right off the bat. The game's controls are very similar to those of a first-person shooter. This particular scheme is used in order to be user-friendly for a wide audience. For many gamers, shoulder buttons are intuitively shooting buttons. The fact that paint is being shot at environments rather than bullets at humans is a refreshing twist. After navigating out of the starting point, a few non-white objects pepper the world.



Figure 3. Motivation.

Floating golden objects beckon the player to paint on/near them. It becomes evident that Monroe is painting sculptures in a garden, many of which bear a resemblance to his mother's paintings. The player might have the notion that he is finishing the mother's works, which, in a way, he is. The black paintballs bounce off of golden pieces, representative of a nontarnishable symbol of royalty. Besides for the statues, there are occasionally swan prints on the floor that show the player where to go. This ties into the swan as a symbol of motivation for Monroe. He doesn't know why he's following it, but he is. The player undoubtedly empathizes with the idea of being motivated by ideas or objects that remain just out of reach. Colorful balloons dangle in the distance, another symbol of fleeting motivation or youthful, innocent desire (see: *Le Ballon Rouge*). Every once in a while, the player comes across a letter that, when painted, turns into a narrated story beat.

One of the initial expositions reveals that the King decided no colors were good enough for his garden, so he painted it white. This could be a commentary on homogeneous societies, gentrification, or exclusionary authoritative rule. In any case, Monroe is splattering black paint about the garden, effectively ruining the whiteness of it all. The next narrative development includes people settling in the King's garden, painting it out of unrest (banging their shins, losing their houses, etc.). The theme of authority vs. revolution is strengthened. As this is made known to the player, shadows start to populate the world, giving a bit more liberty to the hitherto hesitant act of walking.



Figure 4. Shadows or Diversity?

The King created a labyrinth that was designed to be beautiful, not practical. The implicit characterization here is that the King is shallow and garish, more concerned with beauty than practicality. This ties into later characterizations of vanity and fickleness. For example, at the close of the first chapter, the King leaves, promising he'd come back to finish. Of course, he never did. Perhaps he was sick of his subjects ruining his creations. Perhaps he was like John Mayer's Walt Grace: "Done with this world," ready to create a new identity in a new place, on his own terms.



Figure 5. Start Over.

Chapter Two – Growth

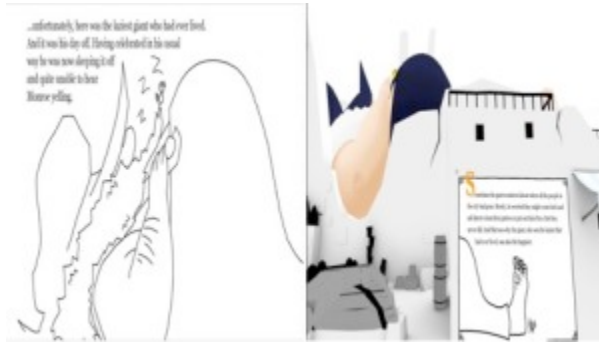


Figure 6. Laziest, happiest.

The second chapter of *The Unfinished Swan*, *The Unfinished Empire*, begins with narration about a giant who inhabits the kingdom. During the King's reign, the giant helped smaller folk with their chores and responsibilities. Nowadays, he sleeps as the sole resident of the kingdom. It is emphasized several times that the giant is both lazy and happy. People no longer badger him, so he's happy. The player can see parts of the giant's body and infer from the rising and falling of his belly that he is sleeping. The lack of requests for aid translates to a lack of responsibility, which in turn results in bliss. It may be a stretch, but it can be surmised that the giant's happiness is partially derived from the fact that he is nobody's dependent. Conversely, the King doesn't seem to be having a whole lot of happiness as his subjects' major dependent. Heavy is the head that wears the crown, so the saying goes.

Seeds of revolution start being sewn by way of public defecation and urination. It is revealed that the King used to be a potter, enjoying the simplicity of creating small objects. When the King refuses to build a sewer system, the populous found his creations a suitable place to relieve themselves. In this way, necessity leads to innovation. Pots are easier than kingdoms to construct and keep in one piece. It will take many lessons before the King

understands this valuable lesson. The fact that he was once a potter – a creative, artisanal pursuit – plays into his voracious appetite for creating. He has a knack, though, for not finishing his creations. Notice that pots almost by definition have an opening; an unfinished end.



Figure 7. When you've got to go...

When the player reaches an open courtyard with black bramble, a few developments come to light. First of all, in a particularly dark segment near this courtyard, the player encounters red-eyed creatures. This foreshadows potential dangers to come. After flipping a few switches, the player unleashes water into a canal. The flood is described as being the King's solution for cleaning up the garbage brought on by his subjects. This could be a commentary on human beings' penchant for creating waste as well as an allusion to a flood myth that is inherent in many cultural belief systems. The King floods his kingdom as an act of monarchical retribution, sweeping away filth and a few of the smaller children. The smaller children bit is an injection of dark humor in the narrative, a subtle but encouraging pat on the player's back to keep moving. Besides for the rich literary snippet of narration, another, more important revelation comes to light.

The player might have noticed that at the beginning of chapter two, she is no longer splattering black paint on a white canvas.

This time around, the paint color is blue. Also, it doesn't last quite as long as the black paint did. When the canal floods and a green vine protrudes from that black bramble – remember the black bramble? – a wave of realization crashes over the player. It's water. With that new information, it should be relatively apparent that the green vine in the middle of the screen is screaming for blue water. Water represents life whereas vines represent... freedom? After watering the vines up a wall and across a few open spaces, the player becomes comfortably in control of where the vines will grow. A sliver of story tells that the vines refused to stay where the King wanted them. The vines – wild, living, growing plants – are representative of the freedom-hungry subjects in the kingdom. The idea of growth is also important to keep in mind since the protagonist of the game is a young orphan. Suffice it to say that the King hates the vines because they don't stay in place. To the player, though, the vines are climbable objects that grant more freedom in the three-dimensional game space.

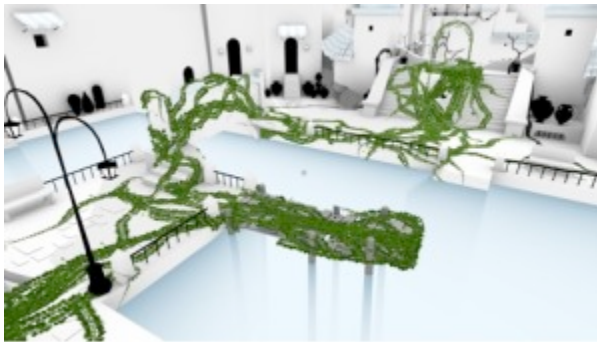


Figure 8. Linear?

As a game mechanic, the vines veil the surprisingly linear story in *The Unfinished Swan*. Besides for hidden balloons and a couple of optional, supplementary plot points, the game is straightforward in its narrative. There are no branching paths or ending-altering decisions to make. However, linearity is not necessarily a

negative attribute in most media. Take for example your favorite book, poem, film, etc. It is always the same, every time. The interactivity that defines video games as a medium often seeks to blur or otherwise obfuscate linear storytelling. When the player feels like she is simply trekking from checkpoint to checkpoint, a game begins to feel more like any other medium that includes moving pictures and accompanying sound. More effective stories come from player creation rather than player discovery. Cinematics, cut-scenes, etc. are not as immersive storytelling techniques as experience, real or virtual. The reason why Gaffgarion's traitorous actions in *Final Fantasy: Tactics* are so genuinely felt by the player is because he played with that character; geared him up and had a hand in how he was built. A heel-turning character is far less effective than a heel-turning character that the player helped develop. This may also explain the impact behind Aeris's iconic death in *Final Fantasy VII*. As a character in the story, Aeris is the main love interest to the protagonist. As a practical character in a Role Playing Game, Aeris is the main healer up until she suddenly meets her demise. Besides for losing a character in a story, the player must contend with the forlornness of being out an integral, useful part of the whole that makes up the party. Experience and player interaction (predetermined/designed or not) are what make video game stories different from the ones written on paper or acted out on screen. In *The Unfinished Swan*, the vines make the world and story seem, ironically, much less constrictive.

Following a revitalizing run-in with a hose, the player is introduced to one of the game's major themes: legacy. The King hates the sea because it ate away his first castle; his first attempt at crafting a kingdom. This is an idea more artfully described by Jimi Hendrix in his song "Castles Made of Sand." To build a castle made of sand means to construct something – a structure, a plan, an identity – out of a degradable material or with a shoddy foundation. The waxing and waning of waves, the rising

and collapsing of empires, the hunger and disgust for authority are all instruments of time's constant progression. With the collapse of his first castle, the King is realizing that perhaps his legacy isn't as indelible as he wishes is to be. "And so castles made of sand fall in the sea eventually" (Hendrix). What he doesn't realize quite yet is how his narcissistic attitude plays into his failures. At one point, the player comes across a statue of the King that reads "Of all his creations, his greatest was himself." The allusions to the Greek myth Narcissus are plentiful throughout the game. The King's figurative drowning in egotistic wonderment may not be as obvious as the statues, paintings, etc. that visually portray the myth. However, the subtle foreshadowing of his impending downfall is purposefully penned.

Before closing the chapter, the player is allowed to look into a telescope that shows a view of a black object in the distance. With some zooming, the player discovers that the blotch of black is actually a monument of the King on an island in the sea. Continued zooming allows Monroe to see into the eye of the memorial statue, where a chair is turned toward a fireplace and a hippo lay to the side. The implications of looking into or through someone else's eyes are many, and this is not the last time the player gets to see from a point of view other than Monroe's. Moments later, the narrator describes how the King created a horrible creature to kill the vines. The creation gets out of control (sound familiar?), and he is afraid for the first time in his life. It takes the force of his pet hippo and the giant to drive the creature into the water. The consequence of the creature's banishment was that the sea turned black for a while. The player just saw a concentrated mass of black in the distance, in the shape of the King. In a way, the King is the monster that drove his people out and ruined his kingdom. He made his bed and is currently sleeping in it, so to speak. Donne writes "No man is an island, entire of itself" to drive home the universalities of

mankind and the importance of interdependence in society. The King is no longer a part of the whole of mankind. By his own accord, he is exiled with nothing but his hippo, who is a symbol of sleep or dreams as can be seen in later portions of the game.



Figure 9. The mind's eye.

Chapter two ends with a mass desertion. Everyone but the giant, who was quite loyal and very lazy, leaves the King. Again, laziness is being tied to a generally positive concept: loyalty. It takes sedentary subjects to keep an authoritative ruler in place, and they won't be found in this kingdom. Monroe boards an airship in ever-pursuit of the swan. He loses sight of it and finds himself in a dark forest. One piece of text in this portion that sticks out is "...no matter how fast he went, the swan was always just out of reach." If it wasn't apparent before that the swan is a symbol for motivation, it sure is now. What makes Monroe progress? What makes anyone do anything? The prospect of catching and finishing that elusive, metaphorical swan.

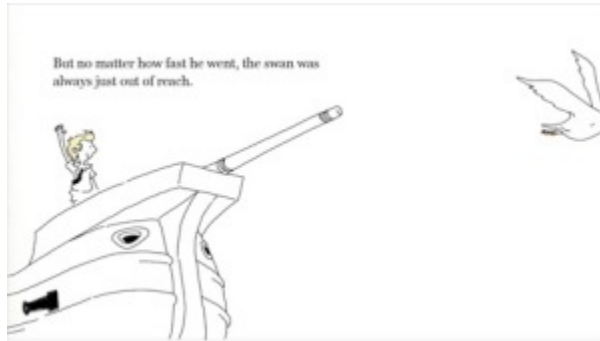


Figure 10. *Raison d'être.*

Chapter Three – Motivation



Figure 11. *Motivation Lost.*

Monroe is chasing after this unfinished swan and feels like he is being led. Consider the idea of wanting. What is it that human beings typically want? Food? Water? Good grades? Money? A job? A family? Then consider those manifestations of desire as end-points. There is often a metaphorical or literal journey to each end, and the journey is rarely devoid of problems. What moves us from a start point – “I would like to obtain a job that pays enough to support a family” – to an end point – “I have obtained said job. Hooray!” – is motivation. Sometimes, motivation is nowhere to be found. Monroe follows the swan (his motivation) into darkness (the age-old symbol for troublesome times) and crashes into a tree. When the clouds

lift, the swan is gone. Now Monroe must find his way without a swan intermittently hinting at where to go. Chapter three, *Nighttime*, commences.

After hopping out of a tree, the only two visible objects in the distance are a glowing bulbous fruit and the previously discovered monument of the King. The monument is much larger, which orients the player as to where he has traveled. It's still far in the distance, though, so the closest inkling of light and warmth is that fruit. En route to the fruit, the player is forced down a dark hole, another possible allusion to Alice's plight. This is a jolting occurrence to the first-time player; being denied a chance to reach the only lighted space in sight. After landing, navigation becomes literally and metaphorically difficult in this dark world. It is troublesome to walk through the pitch-black terrain, much like the hesitancy produced by the shadowless white world in chapter one. The player will often bump into logs, ledges, and other objects on her way to the nearest fruit-light. Metaphorically, it is troubling and sometimes impossible to progress during dark times when motivation is nowhere to be found. The player intuitively moves toward the light, at first for familiarity's sake, then for safety's.

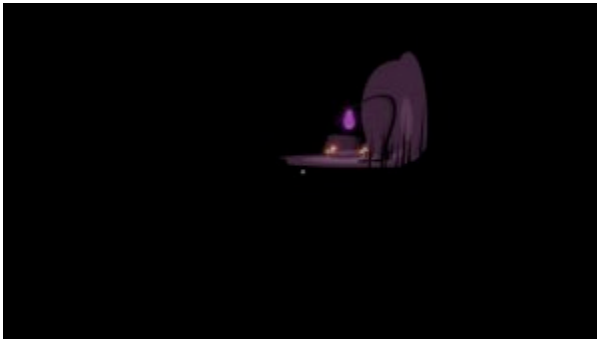


Figure 12. Follow the Light Rabbit

The distance between lighted areas increases from fruit to fruit, which builds suspense. During the lengthier blackouts, the

player is attacked by red-eyed, arachnid-looking creatures. Red slashes rip across the screen accompanied by Monroe's cries of pain. This is the first time the player can be attacked and 'killed' (really, the player is just sent back to the nearest checkpoint) if she does not complete a task quickly enough. Coupled with the typical gaming desire to progress, avoiding attack becomes the player's new motivation. After getting a hang of hopping from light to light, the player is introduced to a new mechanic in the form of a moveable ball of light.

The rolling light allows the player to move safely with her. This builds confidence and freedom in the same way that the vines did in the previous chapter. The player now feels like she can move about the gamespace on her own terms, safe from the outside negative forces that inhibit her progression. There is one sequence where the lightball rolls down a hill, requiring the player to chase after it. Safety, in this case, is fleeting, forcing the player to move quickly to keep from being consumed by darkness. At the end of the lightball portion of chapter three, Monroe comes to a house.



Figure 13. A House is Not a Home.

The story page outside of the house clearly states the thematic idea of legacy, claiming that "The King... decided he'd have to leave a legacy the old fashioned way: with a family." Walking by the house, the player will recognize a yellow dotted line in

the shape of a staircase that hints at the radical gameplay shift to come. Poking around in the decrepit, desolate nursery will reveal another narrative development about the creation of the Queen. The page itself is an allusion to Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam*. It depicts the tip of a paintbrush touching an outstretched finger. Again the narcissistic tendencies of the King come to light, as it is explained that his wife is so beautiful because she is a female version of himself. This also paints the King as a divine figure, a possible allusion to the Christian God creating man in His own image. Directly after learning of the King's human creation, the player is invited to jump into a blank canvas.



Figure 14. *Here We Go!*

With a few ball tosses on the blue playfield, the player becomes quickly acquainted with building in *The Unfinished Swan*. This is another example of intuitive mechanical design. The white space at the beginning of the game, the growable and climbable vines in chapter two, and now an all-out building mechanic are spaced out in a way that refreshes the playable experience before it ever stales. Another interesting gameplay mechanic in this part of the game is how the player's creations in the building world translate to traversable in-game objects in the main world. The cyclical action of building then progressing then building again could speak to ideas of returning home time after time. Analytically

speaking, the connotations of 'home' are complex. The fact that Monroe currently resides in an orphanage emphasizes the desire to feel at home. If home means family, then Monroe might not feel at home for some time. However, his family is the subject of the next few pages of narrative.

One story piece tells how of the many presents given to her by the King, the queen only keeps a little silver paintbrush. If your a-ha lightbulb is having trouble brightening, another tidbit of story reveals that the Queen becomes pregnant, and another still shows the pregnant Queen leaving with a small painting of an unfinished swan. The Queen is Monroe's mother, which means that the negatively portrayed King is Monroe's father. New meaning is cast over the entire game. Monroe isn't wandering through a remote surreal story of a King's rise and fall; he's strolling through his father's memories, experiencing them as his own. Monroe was just practicing exactly what his father did his entire life – building. He put together parts of an unfinished house, completing a job that his father started. To go back to the Queen's departure, what she takes with her is literally an unfinished painting. Figuratively speaking, the unfinished work of art is actually inside of her; it is Monroe. Before leaving the nursery section of chapter three, the player is treated to a cheeky allusion to Journey, another game about life's travails. Looking out into the darkness, one of the only visible features is a set of swan prints. Monroe's motivation is found once more. Onward!



Figure 15. Motivation Found.

The player rides in a boat that takes her to the monument's island. The penultimate page reports that the King mourned for nine years after the Queen left, unable to build anything. The final thing he wants to build is a gigantic monument of himself; a last-ditch effort for people to remember him. His powers begin to fail, and it turns out he can't finish another painting again. He can't even finish his dream. Failing powers can represent failing health, while the propensity for sleeping rather than waking life can represent denial. "Living is easy with eyes closed," so The Beatles have told. The King has locked himself away from the world, a role reversal of the typical tower-bound damsel in distress. It's up to Monroe to climb up and confront his father.

The ascension of the monument is a suspenseful affair. The accompanying music's cadence increases, the rising water acts as a harrying timer, and the platforming is relatively ramped up in difficulty. All of these elements blend together to make the act of literally climbing up a statue of your father a memorable experience. At the apex of the scaffolding, Monroe swings across a platform and climbs up into an eyehole. As Monroe sees his dad, he can't figure out what to say, the narrator explains.

"Ah, it's you, the boy from my dream" the King utters.



Figure 16. *A Boy Within a Dream.*

Chapter Four- Realization



Figure 17. *Helpless.*

Chapter four begins with the player listening to the King as he recounts his life story. A hippo urges the player to “come, sit by the fire,” a surreal anthropomorphic instance that elicits a puzzling response. A close look around the room reveals that the King is surrounded by pictures of himself and of his accomplishments. Some of the pictures, like the statue in the upper-left corner, capture where the player has previously ambled. Others seem like commissioned selfies of a narcissistic monarch. It’s telling that the man is sitting by his lonesome, considering he surrounded himself with himself throughout his life. He built his island and now has to live on it. The blank pictures on the mantle are what interest me most because they

represent the son he never knew, or regret for unfulfilled accomplishments. In any case, the King is about to tell you the details of his dream. To know the King, we must first be the King.

The player is transported into a picture that depicts the house the King grew up in. Exploring a bit, the curious player will realize that there's a mirror on the wall. Jumping on a nearby table allows the player to realize that she is now playing as the King, albeit a younger version with shorts and an underrealized moustache. The King's narration moves the player through a door, and a familiar site comes into view. The space is completely white, much like the opening sequence in the game. By now, this trick isn't quite as impactful, but it is soon explained that by painting to find your way, you have ruined the King's garden. The common response here is recognition that you, as Monroe, negatively affected your father's dream. You ruined everything; a potential nod to growing up and creating your own path as opposed to following in the footsteps of the one that came before you.



Figure 18. Fourth Wall.

The game breaks the fourth wall when credits start showing up. The King mentions that his dream has credits and subtitles, too. Like the rest of the game, this is done with creative spirit. The first credit the player comes across proclaims that *The Unfinished*

Swan is “a dream by Giant Sparrow.” Notice the omission of the word ‘game’. *The Unfinished Swan* successfully weaves a compelling narrative by allowing the player to explore its world. Throughout, the player feels almost completely immersed. The only aspect of the game that causes a hiccup in said immersion is the lose condition; the false death that places the player a few steps back from where he met his demise. Thankfully – and, I submit, purposefully – death doesn’t come too often throughout the game.

Peering over a ledge, the unfinished labyrinth comes into view. Words like ‘abandoned’ and ‘forgotten’ are used, highlighting the King’s remorse. An interesting effect is the fact that as the King is narrating, he’s speaking in the first person, the very same view that the player is donning. You are playing in a memory, a dream, and it actually feels like that due to the narration. In addition, MC Escher-esque architecture starts jutting out everywhere, challenging the player’s perception of up. About the vines that took over his kingdom, the King poignantly claims, “I built it to stand a hundred lifetimes. Instead it’ll be buried in one! A monument for weeds.” Everything crumbles and the dust returns to the earth by the earth. How long a legacy lasts varies, but none lasts forever.



Figure 19. A Lonely Viewing.

Moving forward, the player reaches a dark portion of the dream

as the King waxes poetic about finite legacies. Soon, the player walks into the King's funeral. Nobody is in attendance "except you." At this point, the player swaps back to controlling Monroe, which is confirmed by looking into the mirror on the coffin. I was initially shocked to find that the character models are so basic. Monroe looks like a cardboard cutout, shoeless and gesture-less. With some thought, I came to the conclusion that this is the same feeling human beings have in their infancy. The player is practically forced to move left and right, jump up and down to realize that the image in the mirror is the character she is controlling. This realization of self is a very human trait, one that is learned early on. Educational psychologists Teresa M. McDevitt and Jeanne Ellis Ormrod describe it thus:

"In the second year, infants begin to recognize themselves in the mirror. In a clever study of self-recognition, babies 9 to 24 months were placed in front of a mirror (M. Lewis & Brooks-Gunn, 1979). Their mothers then wiped their faces, leaving a red mark on their noses. Older infants...touched their noses when they saw their reflections, as if they understood that the reflected images belonged to them" (450)

What seems like the use of cheap assets is actually a clever trick by Giant Sparrow.

Walking through the open window, the player grows larger and larger ("like a teenager", the King proclaims), pushing over the giant monument. His final hope at leaving a legacy is now toppled, and the King comes to terms with the fact that when he's gone, he will be painted over "the same way I painted over what was here before me." At this point, his tone has evolved into a gentle acceptance of his fate. When he reflects in solitude on all the things he'd built and left unfinished, he recognizes that he had fun making them. The journey is the important part, not the end result. As cliché as it sounds, life is the same way. It's not the end but the means that define the journey. We've all got the same ending coming up, but how we get there varies from person

to person. I'm reminded of Prince's "Let's Go Crazy," when he philosophizes:

We're all excited/ But we don't know why/ Maybe it's 'cause. We're all gonna die/ And when we do/ What's it all for?/ You better live now/ Before the grim reaper come knocking on your door. (36-43)

A similar sentiment was held by *carpe diem* poets. In "To His Coy Mistress," a poem wherein the speaker attempts to win the affection of a lady, Andrew Marvell writes, "But at my back I always hear / Time's winged chariot hurrying near" (21-22). His main argument is that coyness will lead to a joyless (sex-less, in this case) life, which will end unceremoniously in death. There is a way to live on after death, though, and the King realizes this.



Figure 20. Passing the Torch.

"I have something for you," remarks the King. "This brush isn't mine anymore. My work is over. It belongs to you now." The King figuratively passes the torch to his son. When he adds "I hope it makes you happy, and that someday they will say he is a better man than his father", I admit I choke up a bit. I don't have any personal issues of living up to my father's legacy or being a better man than him, but I think Giant Sparrow has chosen a feeling that strikes a chord with a wide audience. I don't have children yet, but there's an innate feeling that I already possess of wanting them to have a better life than I've had. Psychologically

speaking, I honestly don't know if this is a universal human trait. I do know that when the camera pans toward an open door and the player is forced toward it, the deeper meaning is that life is a blank canvas waiting to be painted. "None of this will last for long", the King prompts, an attitude echoed by artists throughout human history. The game ends with an image of Monroe sleeping in his bed after finishing his mother's painting. In addition to filling in the swan's neck, he paints a couple of Cygnets. In general, this could symbolize having and raising offspring. In the context of this story, I imagine the big swan represents the King while the smaller two, who were created by the bigger, represent Monroe and his mother. The storybook conclusionary "The End" sends the player off with a warm and fuzzy feeling. The book closes, and from here on out, the player sees the blank back cover on the title screen, an image that beckons, "The story is over. Go out and chase your own swan."



Figure 21. *The Finished Swan.*

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HANDLING DIFFERENCES IN SKILLS BETWEEN PARENTS AND CHILDREN PLAYING TRINE AND LITTLE BIG PLANET

By Wolmet Barendregt

Introduction: Cooperative Game Design and Difference in Skill

There are several ways to classify the numerous games that can be played together. A major distinction can be made between competitive and collaborative games. In competitive games each player tries to win over the other player(s). In contrast, the goal of cooperative games is not to win as a player but as a team collaborating with other players. However, within the field of game studies it has become quite obvious that the way in which a game is designed affects the whole gaming experience (Björk & Holopainen, 2005), for individual players as well as groups of players, such as in cooperative games. Seif El-Nasr et al. (2010) developed a set of cooperative design patterns and concluded that both a split screen and the camera led by the first player caused the players to wait for each other and get in each other's way. They conjectured that these patterns could have a negative impact on the play experience. However, in this paper it is conjectured that different skill levels between players play an important role in how these cooperative game design patterns are experienced. For instance, Vaida and Greenberg (2009) found that the level of expertise in groups playing together usually

varies and that ‘gaming groups gave careful consideration to the selection of an appropriate gaming platform and suitable games for groups with ranges of expertise levels’. Taking differences in skills into account therefore gives a crucial refinement to the work on cooperative game design patterns and helps designers to better understand the kind of player interaction a certain cooperative game design facilitates.

This paper thus aims to explore the interaction patterns that emerge when players of different gaming skills play co-located cooperative games and how this relates to different design characteristics of the game.

Study Design

In order to get a deeper understanding of how the game design of cooperative games handles the differences in skills it was decided to focus on parents and children playing together. Parents and older children are likely to have different gaming skills as well as “life skills”, which makes them especially suitable for this study.

Two cooperative games were chosen that have several features in common, but also possess some quite distinct (cooperative) features as well as difficulty levels. These games were *Little Big Planet (LBP)* (Media Molecule, 2008) and *Trine* (Frozenbyte, 2009) on the PlayStation 3 (PS3).

Videotaped play sessions of four parent-child pairs playing these games were analyzed. The analytical approach was Interaction Analysis (IA) of video (Jordan & Henderson, 1995). Several studies have used similar approaches in order to study *how* gamers manage particular gameplay activities (e.g Mondada (2013), Sjöblom (2008) and Reeves et al. (2009)). These studies are often explorative in nature, sometimes even based on a single case. While not relying on a single case, this study involves a limited number of cases and is explorative in nature. The main goal is to see what interaction patterns can emerge when parents

and children with different skills are playing together, and how these patterns can be attributed to game design characteristics.

Data Collection and Analysis

While the pairs were playing, the screen was captured and the pairs were filmed with a webcam. Pairs were urged to play each game for around half an hour to an hour, resulting in approximately 6 hours of videotape. Transcripts were initially created in the players' native language using simplified transcription conventions similar to Aarsand (2007). Informal discussions with/between the participants about the differences between the games that occurred after the play sessions were noted by the researcher. For the reader's convenience, the transcripts have been translated into readable English (not verbatim).

The film material was analyzed by looking for episodes in which the players were presented with typical challenges in the game. We then determined whether there was an observable difference in skill between the players, how this affected the interaction between the players at that moment, and how the game design features facilitated or hindered them in overcoming the challenge together. Thereafter, the typical interaction patterns for the game play in each game were described.

After the gaming sessions all participants were asked to give written answers to the following questions for each of the games: What was the most fun with this game, What was the least fun with this game, How did it feel to play this game with the person you played with? The answers to these questions were used to determine whether the interaction patterns that emerged from the video data matched the players' experiences.

The Parent-Child Pairs

Table 1 shows the characteristics of the parent-child pairs.

Parent	Child	Previous experience
Paul (38)	Ester (11)	Ester has played some PS3 games before on a friend's PS3; Paul has no experience with PS3, but they own a Wii and play games with it together.
Ingrid (41)	Sam (13)	Sam owns a PS3 and plays football games on it with his brother. Ingrid had occasionally participated in these games but isn't an avid gamer.
Lizzy (43)	Susan (11)	They own a Wii on which they play sports games together, but they have never played on a PlayStation.
Ron (44)	Jasper (8)	They own a Wii on which they play sports games as well as some cooperative games such as <i>LEGO Star Wars</i> (TT Games, 2007). They have never played on a PlayStation.

Table 1. Characteristics of the parent-child pairs.

Little Big Planet

In *LBP* each player controls a ragdoll. All ragdolls have the same abilities. Together the players have to jump and avoid obstacles to successfully navigate to the end of a level to win. The players can collect points and costumes for their characters on their way, and there are shared puzzles and objects that the players can interact with at the same time. The camera is led by the first player and a player that lags behind only has a short time to catch up before he/she disappears from the game and has to be revived. A character that has disappeared/been killed reappears once one of the other characters has reached a spawn portal (see Figure 1). Characters can only reappear from each spawn portal a limited number of times. If all characters disappear and cannot spawn because the last spawn portal has been used too many times, the level is lost and must be played over.



Figure 1. The ragdoll with the blue hair has just reached a spawn portal (highlighted circle) in Little Big Planet

Trine

In *Trine* there are three main characters (a thief, a wizard, and a knight) that need to jump and avoid obstacles and enemies to successfully navigate to the end of a level to win (see Figure 2). Each player controls one character and can switch to another character that has not been taken by another player. The three characters are complementary, meaning that they have different abilities. There are shared puzzles and goals and limited resources. The camera follows one player (but not necessarily the first) and other players disappear from sight if they do not stay close to each other. Each character can be killed when it receives enough damage (e.g. by being hit by an enemy or falling in a spiked pit, not by friendly fire) and will spawn at the next portal if another player reaches it. Since this means that a killed character with its special abilities is no longer available to the remaining player(s) until the spawn point is reached, this may lead to a situation where players are very dependent upon each other. When playing with two players, a player whose character

has been killed can take the character that has not yet been taken to continue playing.



Figure 2. The wizard and the thief have reached the same platform in Trine

Results

In this section the typical interaction patterns for each of the games are described and illustrated with excerpts. After the presentation of the typical interaction patterns the game design patterns that seem to cause their emergence are described and the players' experience of the game play is discussed.

Little Big Planet

Three characterizing interaction patterns emerge in *LBP*: Teasing, Laughing at failure, and Teaching.

Teasing

Teasing is a common interaction pattern in *LBP* when one of the players is behaving less skillfully. In the excerpt below, Ester and Paul need to jump some blocks to progress. Ester is struggling to get up on the blocks while Paul jumps up rather easily. Ester keeps struggling with the block and stays behind.

01 34:19 Ester: now the pro will (3) let the pro take care of this ok? Haaa ((she drags too far, but Paul is able to hop up anyway))

02 34:24 Ester: no hm

03 34:34 Ester: [I can't get up ((she is unable to place the block at the right position))

04 34:34 Paul: [will the pro come soon or what? ((he has been waiting for E))

05 34:38 Ester: I am actually a pro at dragging ((she explains that she is good at dragging, not at everything else))

06 34:39 Paul: should I drag? ((he misunderstands Ester's comment and thinks she wants him to drag the horse))

07 34:40 Ester: no, I am a pro at dragging ((she explains again that she is only a professional at dragging))

08 34:52 Ester: uuuhhh ((tries to jump up))

09 35:00 Ester: one just glides on this thing (1) bad material thus ((she tries to drag the block, but the block rolls over instead))

10 35:07 Ester: but uhuh ((unable to hop up, laughs))

11 35:15 Ester: oh I'm being crushed o o ((the block is crushing her))

12 35:22 Paul: shall I ride without you or are you coming? ((he has been waiting with the horse at the top))

13 35:24 Ester: I will just hop onto this here howoowoo! ((both laugh))

14 35:33 Ester: finally! There comes the pro again ((grins))

Even though Ester is lagging behind, this does not cause any

troubles for Paul; he does not necessarily have to wait for Ester and could decide to go on alone. However, he chooses to wait for her, and instead he teasingly reminds her that she said that she was a pro on line 04 and Ester takes up on that again on line 13 when she grins and says: 'Here comes the pro again.' This excerpt also shows the point that both players can act more or less skillfully at different times within a single game; usually Ester acts more skillfully (making her the 'pro' at dragging), but in this case it is Paul.

Laughing at failure

Another typical interaction pattern occurs when one of the players fails but both players laugh at the situation. In the next excerpt Sam and his mother Ingrid are playing. Sam has extensive experience of *LBP* and helps his mother by explaining the game and staying close to her. There are many situations in which Ingrid is less skilled in overcoming the challenges, like jumping and running. In the following example Ingrid has been able to jump over some obstacles but there are still two left before she reaches safety. Sam urges her not to fail.

01 17:35 Ingrid: watch out for me now

02 17:36 Sam: jaha

03 17:39 Sam: yes! ((she has jumped to the next object)) Oh, so please don't fall now!

04 17:44 Ingrid: wheee, no! ((Ingrid falls, both lean back, hands to their heads and laugh, see Figure 3))

We can clearly see that there is no real frustration on Sam's part about his mother's failure. Both laugh and since Sam already had reached the next portal, Ingrid's character is transported there and they can continue playing.



Figure 3 Ingrid and Sam both hold their heads and laugh when Ingrid has died the last time

Teaching

Often the most skilled player shows teaching behavior towards the less skillful player. In the excerpt below, Sam tries to show to his mother how she should jump up on a wheel by going back and performing the jump again.

01 25:10 Ingrid: there! you release it so when it is at [sort of four o' clock?

02 25:12 Sam: [ah I

03 25:13 Sam: ah I'll show you again

04 25:15 Sam: [ah

05 25:15 Ingrid: [ah you show me yes

06 25:16 Sam: watch here

07 25:17 Sam: when it is down there ((points at the screen))

08 25:22 Sam: so, go now

Players' experience of the gameplay

An important theme in *LBP* that emerges from the questionnaire is the sense of togetherness. Ingrid for example writes: “the most fun [with *LBP*] was the collaboration with Sam, that he was having so much fun on my behalf...that he opened up to me.” And Susan writes about the collaboration with her mother: “It was really fun, exciting and cozy”. Some adult participants commented that *LBP* was “a bit monotonous” (Ingrid) or “not very spectacular” (Ron), but it seemed that the positive playing atmosphere between the players compensated for that.

Characterization of *LBP*

LBP can be characterized as a game in which the player that acts most skillfully is able to create progress in the game for both players. Therefore, players can tease, laugh at failures and in some cases even show teaching behavior when confronted with a difference in skill. There are several game mechanics in *LBP* that make this compensation for one player's lack of skill possible. First of all, a failing player is transported to the furthest portal one of the players has reached and the **portals are quite close to each other**. Therefore it is likely that the remaining player reaches it even if the other player's character has been killed. Furthermore, the loss of a character does not usually lead to a loss of some necessary abilities because in terms of gameplay all characters are similar, i.e., unlike in *Trine* (see next section) the avatars do **not** have **functional roles** in relation to the challenges in the game. Therefore the game does not become much harder when one of the characters has ‘died.’ Finally, the **camera** always **follows the leading player**, making it easy for the most skillfully acting player to proceed even when the other player is lagging behind. It is interesting to notice that this contrasts with Seif El-Nasr et. al's (2010) finding that the camera being led by the first player may lead to waiting for each other affecting the gaming experience negatively. In *LBP* the players sometimes choose to

manage the camera and thus wait for each other, as in the following excerpt where Ester is lagging behind and has troubles seeing how to jump.

01 25:10 Ester: I still don't know how one can come there (.) hm
(.) hm

02 25:12 Ester: hm hm ((tries to jump up a wall but has troubles doing so))

03 25:16 Paul: do I have to help you so you can [see something?

04 25:18 Ester: [o please

05 25:19 Paul: see something

However, this does not cause frustration because the players can make the choice to wait or just retrieve the other player at the next portal.

Trine

The characterizing interaction patterns that emerge in *Trine* are Frustration over partner's failure and Frustration of own failure.

Frustration over partner's failure

In contrast to *LBP* failures from the least skillfully playing player in *Trine* often lead to frustration on the side of the more skillfully playing player. Below, two examples are given to illustrate this. In the first example, Ingrid plays the wizard and Sam the thief. Sam is going ahead while Ingrid is trying to draw a box. Ingrid often has troubles using the controller to carry out tasks.

01 31:01 Ingrid: I should maybe create a little box like you did so you can stop that thing ((tries to draw a box))

02 31:08 Sam: you draw a circle, mama!

03 31:10 Ingrid: it went well when you did that

04 31:11 Sam: because I am good

05 31:18 Ingrid: ah

06 31:19 Sam: I don't see anything ((he is on platform higher up which leads him to being out of view))

07 31:20 Ingrid: it worked

08 31:21 Sam: I don't see anything ((a bit more urgent))

09 31:23 Ingrid: a, so you see nothing

10 31:29 Sam: I know how to get over ((tries to jump but is killed and spawned back to his mother's location))

11 31:32 Sam: no, I knew it when I come over (.) you should die

12 31:34 Ingrid: why that?

13 31:35 Sam: you should die ((shoots arrows at his mother's character without any effect))

14 31:36 Ingrid: but what are you doing? You are not supposed to hit me

15 31:40 Sam: I managed to do it but I died because I was too far away

From this excerpt it is clear that Sam's going ahead leads to a problem for him since the camera stays with Ingrid's wizard. Sam is therefore unable to see what he is doing. While he performs skillfully, he is held back by his mother's unskilled performance. Playing the game alone would probably be easier for him, and he thus tries to shoot the wizard, saying 'you should die' in lines 11 and 13. Although it is a little bit playful, he says this without smiling.

The second example is from Jasper and Ron. Jasper is often annoyed with his father when playing *Trine* because he experiences that his father Ron is hindering him. In the following excerpt, Ron is the thief and is (therefore) going slightly faster than Jasper, who is the knight. Jasper is blaming his father for killing them both by going too fast.

01 03:41 Jasper: dad, you are way too fast, I can, I can't do this you know

02 03:44 Ron: I I don't know where I am

03 03:47 Jasper: yeah, now I am already dead ((the knight is killed))

04 3:50 Jasper: now we can't do the fighting anymore

05 3:55 Jasper: dad, you have killed the fighter

06 4:02 Ron: I will also be dead soon, I know, I don't know what to do

07 4:18 Ron: I am also dead

08 4:22 Jasper: good idea to, to kill me

09 4:29 Ron: so (the last of their characters is also killed))

10 4:30 Jasper: is that what you wanted? ((they have to return to the last portal))

A final example comes from Ester and Paul. Ester is playing the wizard and Paul the knight. Ester has just succeeded in hopping to the other side of a spiked pit and her father is about to follow. He dies and Ester has to go on alone.

01 9:38 Ester: oeeh that was lucky

02 9:40 Paul: whow ((P tries to jump but falls down instead))

- 03 9:47 Paul: ouch ((jumps on pins))
- 04 9:50 Ester: daddy you can't hop several times
- 05 9:52 Paul: ((laughs))
- 06 9:52 Ester: daddy every time you hop you land at the same place so you should not hop ((P's character has died))
- 07 9:53 Paul: ((laughs))
- 08 9:58 Paul: that was stupid
- 09 10:00 Ester: whoaw, my god daddy, why now? ((she is now alone as the wizard))
- 10 10:02 Ester: and so I can [xxx
- 11 10:03 Paul: [watch out now ((a skeleton shoots an arrow at the wizard))
- 12 10:03 Ester: whhaow
- 13 10:04 Ester: what did I take on me daddy?
- 14 10:05 Paul: just run now
- 15 10:06 Paul: you are running in the wrong direction
- 16 10:07 Ester: yes but say so then!
- 17 10:10 Ester: this is agonizing [you know?
- 18 10:11 Paul: [run fast now
- 19 10:11 Ester: oaaah
- 20 10:12 Paul: fast ((laughs))

21 10:13 Ester: I do run fast, well you know how fast I run aha
my god

22 10:17 Paul: fast eh

23 10:18 Ester: why do you have to die right now?

It is clear that Ester finds the situation quite stressful. At first she is a bit annoyed by her father's hopping which kills his character (lines 4 and 6). Thereafter she complains about her father having to "die just now" in lines 9 and 23. She now has to proceed on her own until she reaches the next portal, and while her father is giving her verbal advice he cannot do anything to help her. Although Ester is currently the most skillful player, she feels the responsibility to keep them both going (which she explicitly expresses in line 13 saying "what did I take on me daddy?") and this is not easy without the help of her father's character.

Frustration over own failure

While the most skillfully playing player can be frustrated over failures by the other player, the least skillfully player can also become frustrated over his/her own failure in relation to the (either expressed or sensed) frustration of the other. In the following excerpt, Paul and Ester have just opened a wall with a heavy fist and enter a new area. Ester is the knight and Paul is the thief, and they are getting attacked by skeletons. Ester has trouble using the right buttons on the controller to use her character to fight.

01 4:14 Ester: ooh

02 4:16 Paul: [aah behind you!

03 4:16 Ester: [xxx run

04 4:17 Ester: behind you

05 4:19 Paul: take it you can hit

06 4:21 Ester: well well I don't remember, OK hit

07 4:24 Ester: no wrong ((instead of hitting she changes character several times))

08 4:25 Paul: gggg ((makes a sound in his throat))

09 4:28 Paul: soooo yes

10 4:29 Ester: really huhu

It is likely that Ester sees her father's comment in line 05: 'take it, you can hit' in combination with his throaty sound in line 08 as a critique of her not so skilled performance when trying to kill the skeletons. Later on she clearly expresses that she thinks her father is angry with her because she is unable to perform skillfully (especially lines 19 and 21):

11 6:29 Ester: well I don't like this game ((they have slain all skeletons))

12 6:31 Paul: do you not like it?

13 6:32 Ester: weeeeah, take cover! ((skeletons are attacking them))

14 6:34 Paul: whoooow

15 6:35 Ester: ouch, why especially me? ((gets hit by an arrow of one of the skeletons))

16 6:37 Ester: [wva xxx

17 6:37 Paul: [how do you change? ((wants to change to another character))

18 6:39 Ester: so

19 6:40 Ester: I don't like it when you just get angry with me

20 6:43 Paul: I↑ never get angry

21 6:44 Ester: yo when you say that I miss all the time

22 6:46 Paul: ((laughs))

Players' experience of the Gameplay

In *Trine* the most important theme in the questionnaire seems to be that the game was hard and one got stuck, since this was mentioned by 5 out of 8 participants as the least fun. The way the collaboration between the players is implemented in *Trine*, having different characters that have different abilities, adds to the difficulty of the game. For example, Ron points out as the most fun: “[*Trine*] was also more challenging, the interdependence between the players was larger than in the other two games.” When discussing the collaboration between him and Jasper he adds: “One thing was clear: Jasper had to have the fighting character. I also have to admit that since we both didn't know the game, Jasper understood the game sooner than I did and knew when to use which character. A result was that I got even more reprimands.” Especially Ingrid, Lizzy and Ron clearly indicate that the collaboration with their children was more fun in *LBP* than in *Trine*.

Characterization of Trine

Trine leads to more signs of frustration from both players than *LBP*. The game design characteristic in *Trine*, contrary to *LBP*, is that the player that acts most skillfully is still unable to make the team progress in the game when the other player behaves less skillfully, and may even be hindered to behave skillfully.

There are several game mechanics in *Trine* that cause this. First of all, a player is transported to the last portal one of the players

has reached, but the **portals** are quite **far from each other** so that chances are that none of the players is able to reach the portal. Furthermore, the **functional roles** cause the loss of a character to lead to a loss of some necessary abilities, making it harder for the remaining player to reach the next portal (for example, losing the knight makes it almost impossible to fight enemies, as Jasper points out to his father). Finally, the **camera** does **not** always **follow the leading player**, making it harder for the most skillfully acting player to proceed when the other player is lagging behind. In order not to hinder each other, the players have to perform equally skillfully throughout the game. It is interesting to note that Lizzy and Susan, who both lack game playing experience, show less frustration when playing *Trine*, compared to the other pairs. This is likely to be related to the fact that there is no clear difference in game playing skills between them (yet).

Discussion and Conclusion

The results of this study suggest that the cooperative gameplay differs between the different game designs, leading to different interaction patterns between players with unequal skills. In contrast to Seif El-Nasr et al. the camera being led by the first player did not necessarily seem to lead to a negative interaction pattern between the players in *LBP*. We conjecture that it is not a single game design pattern, such as camera setting, that leads to a negative gaming experience for players with uneven skill levels. Instead it is the combination of game design patterns that either facilitates or hinders the balancing of skill levels between the players. Designs where the lack of skill on behalf of one player holds back the progression of the other player can create tension and frustration, such as in *Trine*. In contrast, designs in which skilled performance of one player can help the game's progress for all players, such as *LBP*, lead to less frustration. While the data in this study is limited, the interaction patterns presented here in combination with the analysis of the cooperative game

design features present a basis for further research. As Voids and Greenberg (2009) indicate, it is important to provide modes of play that allow players with different skill levels to play with or against each other. Game designers thus have to be very aware of how (combinations of) challenges and game mechanics in combination with a difference in skills affect the interaction between players. The combination of game mechanics in *Trine* is just an example of how a game design can in fact hinder skilled performance by one of the players, and therefore frustrate the collaboration between players with different skill levels. Other combinations of game mechanics may lead to similar results.

These results indicate that difference in skill is indeed an important factor in how the interaction evolves and is valued. However, there may also be game themes that are generally more attractive to some players, and players may respond very differently to different themes. Furthermore, it is clear that the relationship between the players, as well as their knowledge about a specific game, plays a role in how the collaboration is experienced as well. This is an interesting topic for further research.

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NIGHT ELVES, JARGON, AND YOU: THE LANGUAGE OF POWER WITHIN WORLD OF WARCRAFT

By Christopher Hornyak

Over five million people from around the globe currently play *World of Warcraft*, making it a common target of study. Yet, while most articles have focused on its ludological features, few have bothered to take a closer look at the unique linguistics present within the community of the game. Within *World of Warcraft*, a new, dynamic “language of power” is being formed: alienating outsiders, while allowing those within the gameworld to more efficiently perform in the game. *World of Warcraft* forces players to interact with each other, making communication a vital part of the game. If players do not communicate, they cannot make their characters more powerful – the equivalent of “winning” *World of Warcraft*. This focus on communication in a hypercompetitive space has evolved a special, unique language within the gameworld: one that consists of a combination of novel deictic symbols, “standard” English, and jargon.

An Introduction to *World of Warcraft*

World of Warcraft is set within a fantasy world called “Azeroth.” Within the game, players are tasked with creating a character, picking from a handful of races and classes. Each of these races and classes has their own unique attributes, every combination

bringing something unique to the gameworld. Likewise, each individual class has a certain set of abilities that only they can perform. Once a player creates a character, they are entered into a world in which they must gain levels, defeat powerful monsters, and collect numerous pieces of armor.

As *World of Warcraft* is an MMORPG, or massively multiplayer online role-playing game, the experience of creating and leveling a character is not an isolated one. It is almost impossible to navigate the landscape of *World of Warcraft* without running into other players. Indeed, *World of Warcraft* is a profoundly social experience – playing “solo,” or by yourself, is discouraged within the game. Without making friends, much of the game’s content is inaccessible. Dungeons, for example, are designed to be completed by five players communicating among themselves. In addition, a large amount of strategy is often needed for players to defeat certain monsters.

To facilitate in-game communication, *World of Warcraft* uses a basic chat system. Within the bottom left corner of every player’s screen there is a small, rectangular box in which text appears. Using the chat system in *World of Warcraft* players can communicate with each other in public using “chat channels,” or they can communicate in private – using “whispers,” which are just private messages between two players. As the player moves about the gameworld, her chat channels will change. Every time the player travels to a new zone, she is automatically joined into that zone’s “general” chat channel. In this channel, players usually discuss zone-specific information. For example, players might discuss where certain monsters are or how to complete certain quests. When players enter the boundaries of a major in-game city, they are automatically joined into the “trade” chat channel. Within the trade channel, players sell and buy goods, recruit for their guilds, and look for partners to complete certain tasks that they cannot do on their own.

A Primer on Language, Power, and Communities

Before talking about the dialect of power within *World of Warcraft*, it is important to establish what a “dialect of power” actually is. In brief, a dialect of power is a dialect that allows its user to gain specific advantages within their social sphere. This definition of power is built on Scott Kiesling’s research on language and power within male fraternities. While power had been described in linguistic research prior to his work, Kiesling formulated the idea that power is relative to the community it exists within: “Through language, people place themselves in relatively enduring power roles, as defined by a community of practice ... Every speaker cannot simply use any strategy or form to index any role. They are limited by ascribed traits, previous roles they have filled in the community, the roles available in the situation, and their competence in a certain strategy or form” (Kiesling, 1996, p. 41). Within Kiesling’s framework, users of language take on power roles through the use of language. By taking advantage of certain dialects of community-focused jargon, users can gain power within their own community. Likewise, as users learn more strategies (and better understand the language of their “sphere”), they are able to take on more power roles, allowing them to gather power.

In Kiesling’s research, “power” specifically meant social mobility with fraternities. As “social mobility” is arguably at the center of fraternity life, that is what “power” manifests as in that specific social sphere. In other social spheres – schools, business, academia – “power” can mean entirely different things. Likewise, as “power” is different, the dialect that determines power within that community is different.

It is also important to mention that dialectal power is not innate. For example, within American culture, “standard” English is often considered to be the “preferred” or “powerful” dialect. Yet, this is not because “standard” English is inherently correct, nor

is it because “standard” English has some sort of advantage over other dialects that gives it power. Instead, the power derived from “standard” English comes from the community that has created (and uses) it. When language is present alongside power imbalances, language becomes intertwined with power, as Ahearn explains: “Unequal power relations can result in – and be the result of – symbolic violence (symbolic power, symbolic domination), which Bourdieu maintains, occurs when individuals mistakenly consider a standard dialect or style of speaking to be truly superior to the way they themselves speak, rather than an arbitrary difference afforded social significance. Language and power are therefore commonly intertwined” (Ahearn, 2001, p. 111). As both dialect and power are intertwined, the gap widens between those that can command powerful dialects and those that cannot. After all, the communities that command the dialects are continuously rewarded with power for using them (allowing them to influence said dialect) while those that cannot command the same dialect cannot compete with the growing power imbalance.

Such a dynamic is visible within “standard” English. While “standard” English is simply a dialect, it is treated as if it is more than that – as if it is a language, or rather, *the* language. Peter Trudgill explains: “Historically, we can say that Standard English was selected (though of course, unlike many other languages, not by any overt or conscious decision) as the variety to become the standard variety precisely because it was the variety associated with the social group with the highest degree of power, wealth and prestige” (Trudgill, 1999, p. 9). Using Kiesling’s framework, we see that the most powerful group in the social sphere picked their dialect (the one they were most comfortable with – the one that gave them the most power within their social group) and imposed it (using their power) on those who wished to gain access to their sphere. Woolard expands on this: “Language varieties that are regularly associated with (and thus index)

particular speakers are often revalorized – or misrecognized – not just as symbols of group identity, but as emblems of political allegiance or of social, intellectual, or moral worth” (Woolard, 1994, p. 61) Once again, using Kiesling’s framework we can then define “power” within this social sphere as social, intellectual, or moral worth – by using “standard” English, you are seen as having higher valor, as being more “worthy.” This gives users of the dialect of specific power – one that those who cannot use the dialect cannot access.

Within *World of Warcraft*, however, there is a different understanding of power. Within this specific virtual world, “power” is determined by the strength of your character. That is, characters with better gear (armor), higher player-versus-player rankings, and more in-game currency are seen as “more powerful.” Therefore, within *World of Warcraft*, in order for a language to be truly powerful, it would have to assist in making an individual’s character more powerful. Likewise, much as in the case in the “real world” examples of the fraternity – or “American culture” at large – the language (dialect) chosen to be “powerful” is one that is “chosen” by the most powerful users. Therefore, as theoretically everyone wants to increase the power of their character, the dialect of power is seeded to the rest of the community.

Yet, just as it is important to recognize that it is possible to live and communicate in American society without access to “standard” English – that particular sphere’s “language” of power – it is completely possible to exist in *World of Warcraft* without speaking the game’s language of power. Saying that a “language of power” exists does not mean that it is the only language (or in the case of “standard” English – dialect) communication can happen in, it simply means that certain dialects are privileged over others. In truth, in order for a “language of power” to exist, other forms of communication must exist alongside it. After all,

“power” implies a dynamic – those who have it and those who do not.

The language of power in WoW has three distinct features: a heavy reliance on lingo, unique deictics, and an external reliance on “standard” English. All of these features come together to form a digital “language” of power that is used within the sphere of *World of Warcraft*. All of these facets of language within WoW are equally important. They might occur all at once, or they might separately occur in isolated spaces. In a way, each of the facets of the language are like words in a vocabulary: they are interchangeably used throughout *World of Warcraft*, although not every single facet is used at once. The focus here is that a player who has mastered WoW’s “language of power” can utilize any facet of the language at any time if it is necessary within the context of the game.

The First Facet of *World of Warcraft*’s Language of Power: Lingo

Lingo, the first feature of *World of Warcraft*’s language of power, has much in common with jargon or slang. Lingo is any acronym, created word, technical phrase, or symbol used within a system that has a concrete definition of meaning. On first glance it might appear that I am trying to describe jargon – however, this is not the case. While jargon and lingo are certainly related, jargon specifically implies a disconnect between the word and the social group that uses it. This is explained by Bethany Dumas: “A technical term that is used solely to designate – regardless of its etymology or the social status of those who use the term – is jargon, not slang. Slang characterizes a referent; jargon and standard English only indicate it” (Dumas, 1978, p. 13). While technically the lingo used in WoW is only used to “designate,” it is not socially neutral. This would seem to make WoW lingo “slang,” according to Dumas – yet according to her, slang is only spoken by those of lower “conventional status.” As this is the

exact opposite within *World of Warcraft*, we have to find a different term: hence, lingo.

This is not the first time the term “lingo” is being applied to gaming communities. Mia Consalvo first used the word in her discussion on communicative noise in video game communities: “Game lingo may be noise to the new, casual, or returning MMOG player. It can serve as a shortcut or a marker of status or signal community membership. It goes beyond basic gameplay terms to encompass game-specific terminology, slang, and emerging forms of expression” (Consalvo, 2008, p. 308). Consalvo’s definition of lingo is precisely what exists with *World of Warcraft*’s community: it is a series of terms coined by the community that both assist communication and show that the player using the lingo is part of the community.

Lingo in *World of Warcraft* is used frequently: within the general and trade chat channels, it is almost a guarantee that every line will contain at least one piece of lingo. In fact, lingo itself likely became popularized by these channels. As there can be over 10,000 players on one server, text often appears in the player’s chat box at a rapid rate. Players must compete against each other in order to be seen – as players that “spam” their message by posting it more than three times are quickly reported by players (an offense that can lead to getting banned), the only effective way to have your message seen is to get your message across in a concise manner.

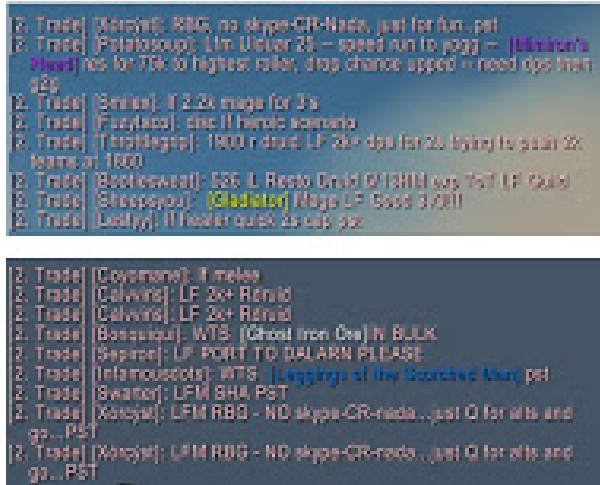


Figure 1: Two chat samples of in-game text. (Source: *World of Warcraft*, 2013)

Figure 1 contains two screenshots of a user’s chat box. Both screenshots were taken around primetime, and while there are no timestamps shown, the text was scrolling rapidly on the screen – at a rate of about two lines a second. In the top image, you can see the player “Xorcyst” typing out a line of text. In this context, “RBG” stands for “Rated Battle Ground” – a player using this acronym is looking to join a team of ten players who fight another team of ten players. While someone might assume “no skype” simply refers to the VoIP program, Skype, it actually means that no external VoIP programs will be used at all. “CR-Nada” means that this player does not care about “combat rating” or CR, a method of rating the game uses to rank players. Finally, “PST” simply means “please send tell.” When these terms are used in context with one another, they form a coherent sentence that lets other players quickly know what “Xorcyst” is looking for. If this line was written without lingo, it would look like this: “I’m looking for people to join my rated battleground group. We aren’t using any VoIP programs and I don’t care about your personal rating. This is just for fun. Please message me.” While his original line might look like nonsense to a player not familiar

with WoW lingo, it is clear that to those that understand it, his method of communicating is much more efficient.

Mia Consalvo notes that “too much lingo can create unacceptable levels of noise for the newbie, or the infrequent player, but player facility in learning lingo is crucial to becoming a part of a particular MMOG community” (Consalvo, 2008, p. 308). Indeed, even though Consalvo is primarily talking about another MMORPG, *Final Fantasy XI*, her words still have truth in *World of Warcraft*. The sheer amount of lingo within *World of Warcraft* is overwhelming – entire dictionaries exist online just to facilitate the learning of the various terms and acronyms. Yet, players who wish to grow in power must learn the lingo. Consalvo theorizes that some tasks are almost impossible in MMOGs without the use of lingo. She opens up the example of a character trying to do a dungeon in *Final Fantasy XI*, running into problems when they are told to do things by their group yet cannot understand them. This problem is easily paralleled in WoW. An individual who plays a mage in WoW trying to do a dungeon might be told to “sheep a mob” (to cast their crowd control spell on a monster), or they might be told to “nuke X” (literally – to use their big damage abilities on the monster marked with an ‘X’ over their head). Likewise, they might be told to “spam AoE until execute” (rapidly use attacks that hit multiple monsters until the monsters get below 30% health). All of these commands would happen rapidly – not to mention many of them would be time sensitive. A mage who has to think about what his group mates are telling him would likely cause the group to “wipe” (everyone dies). Likely, that mage will not be invited back to future groups.

The Second Facet of *World of Warcraft*'s Language of Power: Modified Deictics

The second prominent feature within *World of Warcraft*'s “language of power” is the community's usage (and modification)

of the deictics “^” (carat) and “< - - -” (arrow). This shift was discussed in great detail by Lauren Collister, who wrote about the evolution of both deictic symbols: “The language used is written so that specific words or utterances can actually be pointed to on the screen in addition to being anaphorically referenced; this linguistic environment allows for creative uses of linguistic deixis. The availability of a lexical item for pointing may be what gives rise to the proliferation of arrow-shaped figures in the community’s discourse” (Collister, 2012, p. 10). Collister notes that such a feature is interesting because in this medium symbols can be treated as words – in other words, they are vulnerable to semantic evolution.

While their original meaning was entrenched in the symbols they are supposed to represent (an arrow pointing to the left and an arrow pointing up), they evolved over the course of two years to become the equivalent of symbolic pronouns. This likely happened because of their original usage within *World of Warcraft*’s chat box system. Players would use the arrow to point to themselves, following it with a message. If a player had asked a group of individuals if they wanted to purchase an item, an interested player would respond by saying “< - - - me.” As the arrow would point to their name in the chat box, it was something of a trendy – if not redundant – phrase.

This usage allowed individuals to signify player position within relation to the virtual world. In other words, they would use them to identify themselves in a place where they would normally use “body language.” Over time, however, the “me” morphed into the arrow, allowing the arrow itself to serve as a sort of pronoun. As transactions taking place in the chat box happen quickly, players quickly adopted this new usage, which allowed them to respond without having to type out lengthy text responses. A similar evolution happened to the carat, which quickly took on a meaning of agreement. If an individual said something a player liked, they would respond with “^^^^^” rather

than “I agree with that,” or something similar. While these symbols gained additional meaning, they did not lose their original meaning. Collister explains: “Both retain the sense of their original iconic meaning, but require a familiarity with the community norms to fully understand all of the intended meanings. In this community, they both are polysemous, retaining their original (iconic, in this case) sense while carrying additional meanings” (Collister, 2012, p.16). The note of familiarity with community norms is important – much like lingo, true understanding of these phrases can only come with immersion in the community.

Due to the nature of their creation within the community, these symbols add to the “language of power” in the same way that lingo does. As both are created and fostered by the community, they also imply a connection with the community. If a player is seen using the arrow and carat throughout their speech within *World of Warcraft*, it is implied that they are part of the community – they are “speaking the language” – a quality that implies that they have additional competence, and that they “fit in.”

The Third Facet of *World of Warcraft*’s Language of Power: The Power of “Standard” English ideology

The influence of “standard” English ideology on *World of Warcraft* might seem surprising, especially considering the extensive use of lingo within the community – yet it is important to recognize that *World of Warcraft*’s playerbase does not just “exist” in the gameworld itself. As *World of Warcraft* is a profoundly social game, many communities have been setup outside of the gameworld for players to interact in. While these communities are optional for the player to take part in, many of them are also intrinsically linked to player power. Perhaps the best example for this is of the guild community present within *World of Warcraft*.

Throughout this paper there has been a notion that *World of Warcraft* is a social game. This has been mostly due to the idea that common in-game tasks are made easier through communication with other players. Yet, players who wish to quickly become more powerful – or to reach the “highest” and most “prestigious” parts of *World of Warcraft* – must join a guild. A guild within *World of Warcraft* is a group of players who play together to achieve a common goal. In addition to the social benefits a guild provides, being in a guild also provides tangible advantages to a player. For example, players in a guild receive certain bonuses simply for being in a “good” guild: they will receive more experience for killing monsters, so they will level up faster. They will move faster in the gameworld, allowing them to complete quests faster. They will even get more gold from quests and monsters, allowing them to have more purchasing power in the gameworld.

Guilds, much like players, can be organized into many tiers of “power.” This is because guilds are nothing more than groups of players – so the power of individuals is spread to everyone else within the guild. Likewise, as individuals have their own goals, so do guilds. It is also fair to say that there are many types of guilds within *World of Warcraft* – while some focus on PvP (“player versus player,” or killing other players), others will focus on “casual” content – that is, simply leveling and talking with friends. This essay, however, focuses on the most competitive type of guild, known as raiding guilds. Raiding guilds in *World of Warcraft* are groups of players that specifically gather to raid, or to enter end game dungeons (“raids” – that is, dungeons you enter at the max level within the game) that are released periodically by the game’s developers. These dungeons present a series of challenging, intense encounters that are designed explicitly to push guilds to their very limit. Essentially, when new raids are released, it is a rush to see who can beat them the

fastest. The guilds that enjoy this sort of competition are ranked worldwide.

In order to get into a raiding guild, a player must fill out an application. Typically, these applications ask many questions about the player's individual game history: what raids have they seen in the past? Can they get others to vouch for them? What current armor are they wearing? This is where "standard" English comes in – all of these questions must be answered like miniature essay questions. While the content of the answers might seem like the most important thing, the guild members that judge applicants strongly consider grammar, spelling, and form. The following is a selection of quotations taken directly from the sites of three of the top guilds in the world:

"If it looks like you spent about 20 seconds doing your application, do not be surprised if we spend less time than that declining. Please make an effort with your presentation and try to write coherently" (Midwinter, 2013).

"Applications that don't use proper grammar and spelling are typically regarded as trash. We have no idea who you are, and neither do our raiders who are reviewing your application. If you respond to questions with barely-legible sentences and can't be bothered to hit the shift button, we are going to think you're an idiot because you are writing like one" (Reckoning, 2013).

"If you can't be bothered with proper spelling and grammar then your first impression will be that of a dribbling general forums lolwut idiot. Be mindful of this" (BigCrits, 2013).

The practice of judging players harshly based on their mastery of "standard" English is not limited to the absolute best guilds, however. On the popular WoW community site Maintankadin, a player named Nikachelle comments on what they think a "proper" application looks like: "If your grammar and spelling indicate that you're not fluent in English (which is important EU

side for my guild) or, that you chose to write in the manner of a 5 year old, then I will discard your applicant without further ado” (Maintankadin, 2013). The player even goes as far as to refer to their application process as “an English exam.” Another player named Chunes notes that “professionalism, proper grammar, [and] good vocabulary” are the most important things he looks for in a guild application.

What is visible in these snippets of *World of Warcraft*'s community is a connection between mastery of “standard” English and mastery of *World of Warcraft*'s mechanics. This “competency link” seems to apply a handful of assumptions about language. The biggest assumption is that there is a “clean” and “proper” version of English that everyone can aspire to, and that failure to achieve this is a sign of laziness. Lippi-Green comments on the phenomenon heavily, noting the example of a Hawai’ian meteorologist with 20 years of experience who was passed up for a promotion due to his accent: “This is a very good – if very disturbing – example of how people think about language: if we want to, if we try hard enough, we can acquire a perfect language, one which is clean, pure, free of variation and unpleasant social associations. Language which is not perfect is a handicap, and does not need to be accepted” (Lippi-Green, 1997, p. 145). In Lippi-Green’s example, the meteorologist seemingly has the perfect resume for the job – yet because he has an accent and his English is not “perfect” (because it does not conform to “standard” English ideology) he is not considered for the job. This is because the general belief is that those who cannot speak “proper” English are doing so because they lack the willpower to learn how to. When you consider that *World of Warcraft* is played around the world – and that many players do not speak English as their first language – this line of thought suddenly becomes problematic. If competency in “standard” English is linked to performance, players who might otherwise be excellent at *World of Warcraft* are excluded.

The inclusion of “standard” English into the language of power within *World of Warcraft* helps illuminate one of the core concepts presented in this paper’s introduction. That is, while each element of the language of power has its place in *World of Warcraft*, not every element must be used at once. For example, a player within the gameworld might never need to utilize standard English while he is actually playing WoW. At the same time, that player might need to show a high knowledge of WoW lingo/deictic usages during her in-game activities. At another point in time, that same player might wish to apply to a raiding guild. At that point, she might not need to show proficiency in novel deictics, but he might have to combine standard English and WoW lingo. As is the case with “languages of power” in other spheres, complete mastery is not necessary for power to be extracted using the language. Certainly, different levels of mastery receive different advantages.

Gameplayl Notes on *World of Warcraft’s* Language of Power

Mia Consalvo closes her discussion on language in MMO’s with the following note: “[Game language] is dynamically co-constructed by game developers and players, shifting and changing over time to meet the demands of gameplay as well as the idiosyncratic preferences of players... There will always be particular terms, abilities, and kinks in specific games to learn, and if such learning fails to occur, noise is the result” (Consalvo, 2008, p. 309). From both a sociological and a ludological perspective, the presence of a language of power in *World of Warcraft* is a problematic one. Via Kiesling, it is interesting to note that the same exact power dynamics present in the real world are present in the virtual one. Just as language is innately linked to power in real life, in *World of Warcraft* language and power are inseparable. For an ethnographer or linguist, a thorough study of the language of power might reveal interesting notes on how language is chosen and how it evolves.

In much the same way, a game-centric perspective on the language of power in *World of Warcraft* cannot be ignored. The language of power within *World of Warcraft* is, in many ways, a game mechanic – it is something that must be learned by the player in order for them to gain some sort of in-game advantage. Yet, unlike something like a specific fight mechanic, or a strategy that can be “taught” by the game, there is no in-game mechanism for learning the language of power. Instead, players must interact with the community, picking up on the forms and usages of the language as they go. While this is how it has always been within MMORPGs, it might not be the best way of doing things. After all, is something that gives power within a game yet cannot be taught by the game a good thing? Traditionally, such a gameplay mechanic would be considered undesirable.

On the other hand, the presence of the language of power within *World of Warcraft* does not seem to be controllable by the developers. The language is organic – it is something that grew from within the community. Considering what we know about how power and language intermingle via Kiesling, it seems unlikely that developers could actually control the evolution of language within the game. One popular “solution” among certain developers is to limit the social interaction of the players – yet this is not desirable, as it is something that would corrupt the game’s spirit. Perhaps the most pragmatic solution is to simply offer up methodologies within the game for a player to learn the language. Still, even that option seems distasteful, as it seems to prop up a power system within the game based on language ideology. As it stands, the only thing that can be done is to study and understand the language of power within *World of Warcraft*, perhaps building up a database of language usage and player power. Further research needs to be done to see how both realms of power interact with each other – and, more than that, how we might begin to deconstruct both while preserving the “community” (while, at the same time, leveling the playing field).

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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF DEATH, CAKE, COMPANION CUBE, AND THE POTATO IN THE PORTAL SERIES

By Lisa Yamasaki

Trying to counter the idea that video games have narrative, Jesper Juul (2003) emphasizes the significance of a challenging outcome, since any successful completion of a game depends highly on a player's effort and attachment to the outcome. Although Henry Jenkins (2002) agrees with Juul in that not all video games have narrative goals, he asserts that games make use of narrative aspirations in the space of the game. Without stating that games must have narrative functions, Jenkins interconnects the ludic in game design and narrative features by looking at the use of artifacts and space navigation. While Marie-Laure Ryan admits that few players retell their steps in the game, she also mentions that players assert authorship when they discuss their avatar's decisions. Ryan's models assert the relevance of narrative in games to present the reader with questions on the game developers' reasons for providing realistic graphics and witty stories to accompany the game rules (Ryan, 2002). Combining the narrative and algorithmic aspects in games, Ian Bogost (2006) professes that a game's unit operation, or action formed by a user's interaction with a game's formal mathematical based coding, also comprises of the game's cultural context, or story elements, and the player's subjective experience of that game. A game's procedural rhetoric, or the persuasive

component in a game, uses representations of visual media to depict a cultural expression. While a player interacts with the game's representations within a literal context, a player's subjective experience with a game allows for him/her to use the game as a metaphor for larger cultural meanings or to regard thematic elements in a game (Bogost, 2007).

Although many games allow for a combination of the constructions of narrative through engagement with simulated reality, I argue that the *Portal* series (Valve Software) conveys the theme of sublimated death as a paradoxical symbol of rebirth and transformation through the use of other symbolic objects, ones that Kinder (2002) refers as hot spots in narratives that seem "incongruous" yet cohesively piece together the story. Such objects have the power to transgress their meanings in typical contexts in order to unite different parts of the story, which gives them a more compelling meaning (Kinder, 2002). While one narrative goal in the game is to expose players to the idea of a perfectly neat science center gone wrong, some players may reexamine objects in the game to try to find missing clues to what had gone wrong in the lab. Since the puzzles allow for players to learn to solve puzzles, perhaps one unintended result is that players also look at objects to try to fill in the narrative. In context to the *Portal* games, the potato, the companion cube, and the cake function as hot spots that help communicate the theme of sublimated death. While the games have unit operations on puzzle solving, which repeatedly build on one another, my interactions with the games also demonstrated an evasion of death *and* a repetition of death to perfect puzzle solving. While my position is not to argue that one *should* look at video games with narratologist approach, I further the discussion that death transforms meaning in the games, particularly through the use of the cake and potato.

Repetition of Death: Narrative Trope, Ruse for Ludic Self-Mastery

As in many video games, death gives players chances to restart the gameplay and to perfect one's skills especially after learning how one failed in the previous gameplay. In Gonzalo Frasca's essay, *Simulation vs. Narrative: An Introduction to Ludology*, he mentions that the video game medium requires that players repeat levels and chapters in order to successfully navigate the game mechanics, which impacts the unfolding of the narrative in some games. Different from the fixed structure of traditional stories, repetition becomes a crucial part of the gameplaying experience, which imparts fluidity to the way that players interpret their rendering of the story (Frasca, 2003). Suggestive of the significance of games in the psychoanalytic sense, gameplay in video games often entails the repetition of experiencing negative feelings, disappointment, frustration, and anger in order to master the skills required to master a certain challenge.

While Sherry Turkle (1995) indicates that players use games to practice enduring hardships, overcoming negative feelings, or engage in cathartic feelings, Jacques Lacan (1973) initially questions the function of the game or ludic in providing self-mastery and indicates that the game further eludes the subject from self-mastery (Lacan, 1973). In psychoanalytical contexts, a game consists of signifiers that lead to another signification chain, thus widening the gap between the subject and the repressed issue. Rather, the real or the actual issue of repression arises in the realization that something is amiss through a noise or a gesture or a lack of something in the original memory (Lacan, 1986). If self-mastery of a repressive memory is part of the curing process, it makes sense that repetition has a paradoxical nature. While this idea of the ludic initially appears to be synonymous with Callois' notion of *paidia*, Frasca's distinction of ludic as having a winner as its outcome affirms

the outcome in psychoanalytic games even if the outcome is paradoxical and entails a meandering path prior to the outcome (Frasca, 2003). In terms of Chell, the avatar, her repeated attempts allude to the ominous nature of the test-taking techniques, one that is alluded to in GLaDOS' address to her as a test-taker out of many test-takers who died in the process of resolving the puzzle. For the player, however, self-mastery becomes a guise during the later puzzles in *Portal: Still Alive*, since the logic of skill acquisition from previous puzzles fails to offer the player quick solutions for solving difficult puzzles, as in the case of Chamber 18.

In this chamber, the player has to take the falling momentum learned in previous Chambers 10 and 12 to defy gravity and shoot portals in midair. Since Chamber 18 contains a multi-roomed chamber, the gameplay incorporates more opportunities to fail. Initially, the player has to portal into other parts of a large room, which entails free-falling and running into walls to hopefully land successfully through a portal. It is hard enough to get to the super megawatt button—the device that signals puzzle completion once the player puts a weighted object on it—but one realizes that she has to enter into another chamber to retrieve the storage cube, or the necessary cube to solve the puzzle, to place it on the button. When one gets to the room, turrets, or little guard robots, await the player, ready to shoot from different locations of another room. By creating portals to direct the fire pellets to kill the turrets, one has to use the timed sequence to activate a pellet to hit a receptacle in order to activate a gate. To add to the frustration, the process of defeating the turrets in Chamber 18 contrasts differently from the skills acquired in killing them in Chamber 16—the room dedicated to mastering skills to sneak up behind the turrets and dropping storage cubes on them. Despite that players use skills from previous chambers to solve the last chambers, sometimes the logic acquired from previous puzzles

actually pulls the player away from her goal—instead of heading to the state of inertia, one has to further oneself into frustration.

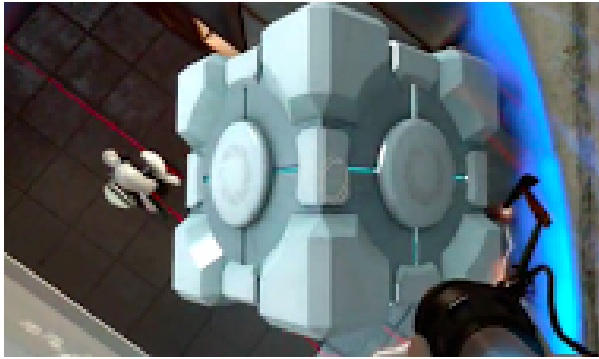


Figure 1. Storage cube and turret.

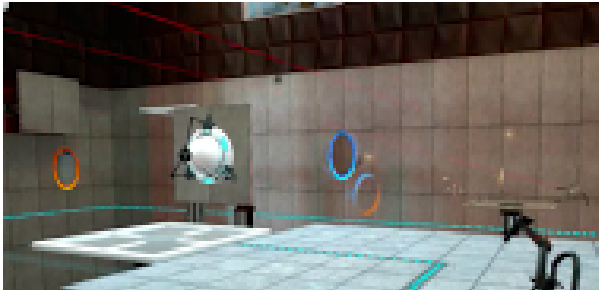


Figure 2. Chamber 18.



Figure 3. Free-fall Chamber 18.

Yet, one has to always consider that the easiest solution in subsequent puzzles after overcoming challenging parts of a puzzle often consists of considering an obvious response—in the room with the storage cube in Chamber 18th, this easy yet often overlooked solution is to think with portals and portal one's way out of the room, therefore by passing the lifts taking the player from one side of the room to the desired location. Since it becomes more apparent that the chamber traps suggests some meaning beyond the façade, one wishes to further unravel the meaning behind the addicting feeling of nearly missing death to see what lies beyond the puzzle-solving. The unit operation of death as elusive self-mastery plays nicely in concomitant with GLaDOS' sardonic reminders of death to Chell. While the player assumes GLaDOS is the enemy, her paradoxical statements hint

to an effective mindset to resolve the puzzle—that nothing is what it seems, including one’s successful completion of Chamber 19.

In context of GLaDOS’ reminder of Chell’s proximity to death, the player’s repeated attempts to successfully solve a puzzle contributes to the narrative of having Chell die and come back to life, having the similar consequence as revealed in GLaDOS’ wishes to torture her with her rebirth only to continue testing. While Chell’s experience of the game is to solve puzzles and maintain her life, the player’s experience of the game unfolds with each successful resolution in the chambers. While dying and reliving serves to push the narrative, the learning acquired through repeated failed attempts also engenders curiosity about the objects in the game and the implicit details in the narrative, such as GLaDOS’ paradoxical statements. While serving a purpose to show a sinister antagonist, players become accustomed to rethinking strategies to solve puzzles that they may become just as interested in the details in the dialogue as well.

While Chell does not comment or show any sign of being bothered by GLaDOS’ statements, the player questions if the progression of the chambers results in Chell’s escape or an explanation for GLaDOS’ empty promises other than motivating the player to prove her wrong. GLaDOS’ paradoxical statements demonstrate that she holds the answers to the signification chain formulated by her speech and various forms of visual images on the walls throughout the Science Center. One example is her paradoxical statement on portal devices and forward momentum signifies the double entendre of a player’s sense of control in mental exertion yet simultaneous confusion: “You appear to understand how a portal device affects forward momentum or to be more precise, how it does not.” Initially, one denies this statement, since the portal device enables one to strategically place portals to allow one to free-fall to one’s destination. Yet,

the statement is also valid in the sense that the portal device does not directly affect momentum; by giving the portal device agency in the sentence, it hides the fact that gravity provides effective free-falling, not the portal device itself. Indeed the notion of mastery and fallacy of mastery is a paradox itself—the more one achieves in the game, the more one perceives opportunities for failure.

One could argue that Clink Hocking's (2009) notion of ludic dissonance, in which the game mechanics make the player assume certain qualities they do not want if they follow the narrative, applies in the Portal narrative. After all, his sharp critique of Bioshock and Randian objectivism proves that the ludic contract of the game differs from the goals in the narrative contract, thus either compromising the player's willingness to progress in the game or play the game in a manner that compromises their desire to see the narrative unfold in a certain way. While his criticism for Bioshock cleverly depicts the misalignment between game mechanics and narrative, the paradoxes in the Portal series do not hinder the advancement of the game; rather, they entice players to curiously ponder their value beyond a ludic context, as seen in their relationship to the cake, companion cube, and potato—symbols of subversions of death.

Significant Symbols: The Cake, the Companion Cube, and the Potato

Even though the cake and companion cube may function as objects that show GLaDOS' manipulation, they also function as symbolic items that blur the distinction between life and death. The game developer commentary in Portal:Still Alive and Portal 2 comments that one goal of such items is to elicit motivation to get back at GLaDOS, as seen in the use of the companion cube and having to destroy it. Yet, perhaps an issue that is

unaccounted for is that the players contribute to the ludic role of the such items and develop meaning about them.

When the player/Chell confronts GLaDOS at the end of *Portal: Still Alive*, s/he notices the computer screens attached to the structures holding GLaDOS' body. The flash of images on her computer screen in her room demonstrates other links on this signification chain. Yet, if a player replays the game or finds an online walkthrough, s/he can better examine that the flash of images function as a collection of symbolic meaning to the significance of "the cake". Some images include different cakes—one has inscribed "Happy Thanksgiving" and another, "October 29th, 1982"—different animals, old forms of machinery, a piece of chocolate cake with pliers either above or alongside it, park benches, and an open computer circuit. While some players ascribe little or no meaning to these images, other players might perceive associated meanings between the idea of cake, a sweet desert item, and forms of technology. In addition to functioning as a collection of symbolic items, the cake itself is not necessarily an item that GLaDOS intends to offer. Rather, it is an object situated in a web of technological devices that she offers Chell, even though the player may spend additional time looking at the different pictures to decode it. Her promise of cake functions as a paradoxical statement that states that the promise of a cake is the association of sweet dessert given in the midst of puzzle solving within a scientific center.



Figure 4. October 29th 1982.

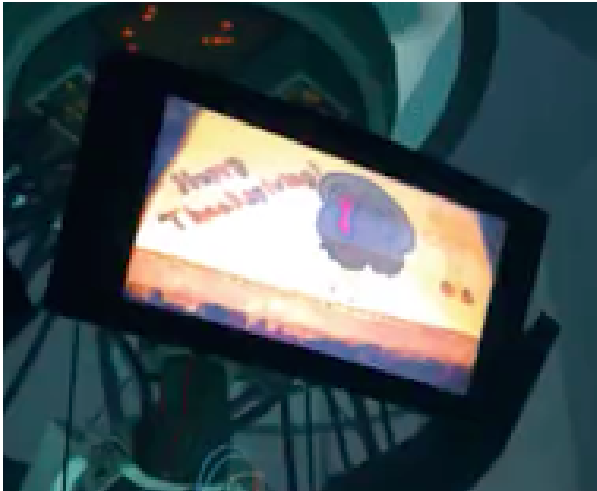


Figure 5. Happy Thanksgiving.

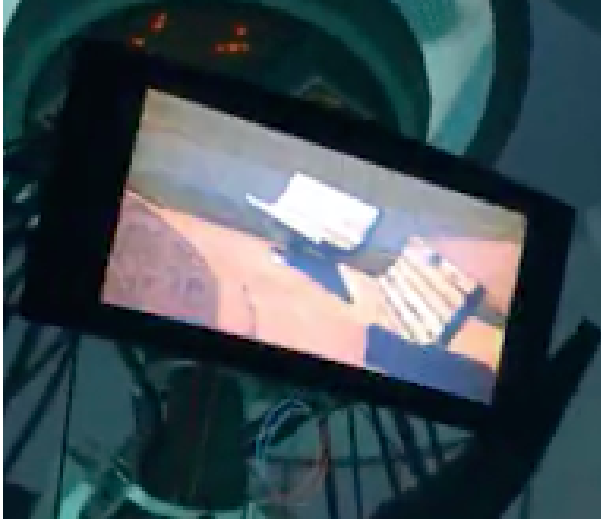


Figure 6. Park benches.

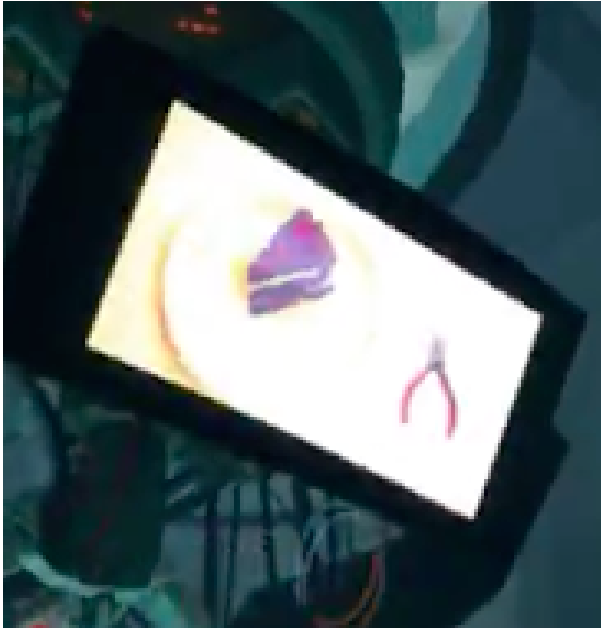


Figure 7. Cake with pliers.

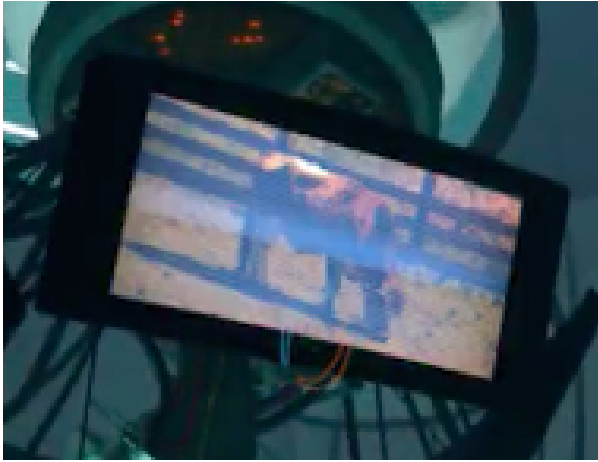


Figure 8. Cow.



Figure 9. Computer chip.



Figure 10. Primitive machinery.

The notion of sublimation in a psychoanalytic context helps explain the association of images with cake. Joan Copjec (2004) defines sublimation as that which inhibits the subject's drive from attaining satisfaction. The actual aim of a drive is to continue desiring, thus sublimation actually helps the subject achieve this aim, incidentally showing a transformative aspect of the object itself. The fact that the drive extends beyond an object, rather to an aim, explains for the notion that the subject seeks more objects as if creating a collection of desired objects (Copjec, 2004). Moreover, the drive to collect more objects refers back to the aforementioned cake images on GLaDOS' monitor at the concluding boss fight in *Portal*. The repetition of the cake images exemplifies a collection of different types of cakes yet never the cake itself. It opens the possibility that the cake is not an actual cake at all, rather the different meanings of the cake, as derived from GLaDOS' references to it and the images on the computer screen, refer to the idea that the cake stands in for something entirely different—cake as a paradoxical symbol of life and death. This relationship harkens Lacan's famous statement of the ultimatum between “your money or your life,” in which the choice for life entails a deprived life without money (Lacan, 1977, p. 212).

If one perceives the libidinal drive as a life force—as seen in the interconnection of libidinal drives and the association of feeding—it is possible to perceive the cake as a promise for life.

Yet the scene at the end of chamber 19—the icon of the cake and shortly after, the scene of the open fire—and the constant promise of cake throughout the game interconnects the notion of life and death. Chell never gets the cake, showing that each time the player successfully solves the puzzle, there might be a possibility that GLaDOS will give Chell the cake. Furthermore, the cake also represents a choice of life over death even though the tiny icon of cake on the wall of Chamber 19 flashes to the player before the view perceives the open fire pit. Since the cake also alludes to death, the promise for cake simultaneously and paradoxically functions as a reminder of death. The ambiguity in the equation of cake and death affirms the idea that death is an idea that is not entirely founded on a will to die. Humorously concealing her intentions when she initially confronts Chell in *Portal 2*, GLaDOS comments that she wishes to “reanimate the dead” after killing Chell only to continue more testing. Her comments refer to sublimation of the death drive, since death is not a fate she desires for Chell. Rather, she desires Chell’s cunning escape from death, causing GLaDOS to experience euphoric sensations—a sensation echoed within the player.

If taking the interpretation that GLaDOS desires Chell to live, the player perceives another similarity to another character’s admiration for Chell, yet it is expressed through obvious affirmations of life that simultaneously guide the player through gameplay. Doug Rattman, the mysterious scientist who leaves Chell clues for survival, extends his feelings about his beloved companion cube to Chell. By referring to Chell as “the angel who took the companion cube away,” Rattman gives Chell a positive association as an angelic heroine but also an extension of the admiration he expresses to his companion cube, as seen in the pictures of the companion cubes on bodies of pinup girls and historical figures in Test Chamber 17. Both examples of libidinal objects—objects signifying life—the companion cube and Chell are interestingly interconnected in another way.

According to the game developer commentary in *Portal: Still Alive* the mandatory destruction of the cube brought out GLaDOS' evil nature and helped players use the incinerator, yet players have perceived the cube as having different identities. In *Portal 2*, GLaDOS makes the companion cube explode twice and provide another one for Chell, thus suggesting that there are more companion cubes than the one Chell previously killed. By extending the comparison of the companion cube to Chell, Rattman could provide a clue to Chell that she is a clone as well. While it is not a theory that I entertain, the idea of Chell as a clone certainly addresses the sublimation of the death drive in that she cannot die. In *Portal: Still Alive*, after Chell escapes and is trying to find an exit, GLaDOS tells Chell that she has her brain scanned in the computer system in the event of a disaster. While some players might be distracted by game mechanics—the escape portion of the game requires that players look for optimal places to launch oneself out of rooms—GLaDOS' comment functions as a precursor to her comments to reanimate Chell from the dead. By suggesting that Chell could be restored, GLaDOS is also gesturing that Chell is a clone. Similar to the companion cube, Chell could be rebuilt and killed, hinting to the chamber in *Portal 2* when Chell/the player tries to grab the cube, which evaporates into air. The repetition of the many cubes is comparable to the idea that Chell's repeated life, especially when viewed in connection to the emphasis of Chell's return in GLaDOS' initial greeting to her in the first game, "Welcome again." Yet, other players theorize on the clues provided in the companion cube by further investigating the way that the cube is discussed in the game. Some game theorists perceive that the cubes are previous test subjects with speaking abilities.

In Game Theory's YouTube video, *Game Theory's Portal's Companion Cube has a Dark Secret*, the companion cube is described as comprising of former test subjects, who previously failed the tests that Chell/the player successfully solve, and the

former female scientists, or “Girls of Aperture Science” depicted as pin-up girls in the Rattman den in Chamber 17 to “(Game Theorists, 2013). Game Theorists presents an interesting idea about companion cubes as former humans, an idea that further supports my argument about the sublimation of the death drive. GLaDOS does mention that she has tons of companion cubes, just as the player perceives a lot of relaxation rooms for the numerous test subjects. Thus, this idea asserts that death is not the end goal for human life or artificial life. In addition to Chell being cloned and injured test subjects repurposed as companion cubes, GLaDOS herself functions as an example of sublimation of the death drive.

Echoing the theme of GLaDOS’ desire to repetitiously kill Chell and reanimate her, the potato functions as an embodiment of GLaDOS’ reincarnated identity. It should be prefaced that before Wheatley reawakens GLaDOS, he leads Chell to a room of children’s science projects, most of which are potato battery projects. The player examines the different projects as Wheatley disparages the volcano project and comments on the disaster of “Bring Your Daughter to Work Day,” the day the children brought their projects when GLaDOS locks the facility and fills it with her deadly neurotoxin. If the player looks carefully at one science project, s/he notices the name “Chell” written at the bottom of a white three-paneled display board. Chell’s project features a potato battery, but in place of the potato battery is an overgrown potato plant. At first, the player considers that it was a coincidence of potato projects, but events after this finding refer to the significance of the potato.

After Chell transfers Wheatley into GLaDOS’ body at his insistence, Wheatley puts GLaDOS’ micro-chip—or her mind—into a potato, and he dumps Chell and GLaDOS into a long descending tunnel that leads them to the Aperture Center’s underground and early history of the place, which will inevitably lead to discovering a cabinet filled with Cave Johnson’s early

awards in Potato Science. Thus, the potato interlinks the three characters—GLaDOS, Chell, and Cave Johnson, the CEO of Aperture Science Center—thus acting as a catalyst for many myths concerning Chell’s identity as adopted further alluded to in GLaDOS’ numerous comments to Chell. If Cave was a potato scientist and Chell’s child project was a potato battery, it leads players to consider that Chell has previous exposure to the Aperture Center prior to her test-taking days.

As an aside yet contributing explanation to the significance of the potato, the fact that her potato plant spawns the body for GLaDOS’ mind reinstates the idea that Chell is responsible for GLaDOS’ misfortunes and discomforts. In addition to eliciting sympathy from the players, the scene of GLaDOS’s stripping of power and denigration to the voltage of a potato battery and hence limited power shifts players’ perception of her as just a sinister opponent. While the potato functions as a reincarnated form for GLaDOS—first as Caroline, the devoted secretary, then as rogue AI GLaDOS, then GLaDOS as a passive potato—it also functions as a turning point for the player. While Chell never voices the distinction from evil GLaDOS to tragic GLaDOS, the player reinterprets GLaDOS’ character and her need to test when they watch her relive her own mechanical memory as a human who confirms her boss’ commands and devotion to him. The backstory of her devotion for him contributes to the player’s assessment of the goals of the Aperture Center, yet it also shows GLaDOS’ repression of such feelings in lieu of her intellectual rigorous desire for scientific testing. Even though she is ambiguous in her own claims to her humanity—as seen through her admission to deleting her Caroline from her system to her claim that Caroline resides in her—a player perceives a possibility for GLaDOS’ obsession with Chell. Even in the midst of her sarcasm, she notes that her human part was similar to Chell, possibly indicating some level of narcissistic identification with her and clarifying the reasons for her inability to kill Chell.

While the cake was a function of a libidinal sublimation or pleasure through mechanical manipulation, the potato functions as a symbol of the intersection of the organic and inorganic life—Chell’s overgrown plant and GLaDOS’ new body and GLaDOS’ existence as an AI and her human existence as Caroline. Aptly considered the more inconspicuous hot spot than the cake, the potato weaves the different elements of past, present, and future elements in the story. Whereas the cake signified a rouse for Chell and decoy for death, the potato completes the theme of death as an end. Similar to the role of the potato as a body for GLaDOS, the companion cube functions as a metaphor for Chell. While the cube does not shelter Chell’s mind—rather it is theorized to shelter previous test takers’ minds in other theories—it functions as an artifact whose significance is comparable to Chell’s being. Like the cake, the cube symbolizes an affirmation of life, yet the cube is Rattman’s desired object, a position that eventually transfers to his feelings towards Chell. While it means very little to GLaDOS, except in her assessment to taunt Chell’s violence towards others, the cube’s significance to the games asserts itself as the sole accompanying figure that could identify with the player. Instead of offering embodiment as the potato does to GLaDOS, it offers the player a metaphor for its synonymous relationship to Chell. Just as the cube accompanies Chell as a similar entity that silently helps to solve puzzles, Chell provides the player an effective body—a shell, if one wishes to use the playful pun—onto which one projects one’s experiences in the games.

Throughout the games, the opposition between organic and inorganic exposes the subliminal message that death does not clearly denote an end to living, rather it suggests transgression of it. Moreover, this unit operation, theme of transgression of death, asserts itself in different other details of the game, ranging from the necessary mindset in game mechanics to minor details in the visuals such as the different signs in the Aperture Center.

While some players may opt to simply solve puzzles, other players revel in finding meaning through exploring hidden themes that linger with the players long after they complete the game.

Nick Montfort makes an interesting comment on the game developers' ideas on *Portal's* narrative. After articulating *Portal: Still Alive's* unique interconnection of game mechanics and narrative, he gestures that players make meaning from the game despite the game developers' lack of referring to philosophical depth. Rather, by articulating that some games have conceptions as opposed to conveying concepts, Montfort demonstrates that conceptions are the initial trajectory of ideas. While it is not imperative that the cake, potato, and companion cube convey deep meanings to every player, perhaps I can assert that these items in the game infer deeper significance that offers a multi-level reading of the game through examination of the objects. Perhaps articulating reading of such objects creates larger discussions on the game series' abilities to start different conversations. Another possibility is that by reading deeper meaning from the objects—and therefore inferring a deeper narrative—I demonstrate that the games touch upon my sensory experience. Reflecting on the manner by which games function as expressions of creativity in puzzle solving, Henry Jenkins (2005) articulates that games provide new sensory experiences. While he discusses these new sensory experiences as typically combining play with skill development—a process of learning strategies by analyzing one's own tactile effect on the game interface—I expand upon this idea by including the process of investigating the meaning of certain game artifacts in relation to themes arising in the narrative. For some players, part of the sensory experience allows for deeper insights into the game artifacts, especially in the case of games with uniquely interconnected narrative elements and ludic experiences.

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UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES: MALARIA AND ORIENTALIST DISCOURSE IN FAR CRY 2

By Marcus Hensel

I: *Far Cry 2*, Orientalism, Ecocriticism

Since its release in 2008, *Far Cry 2* has been called many things: “immersive,” a “rugged recreation of Africa,” coercive, pessimistic, “unusually punitive,” and an offering with “comprehensive moral unease.” ([1]) One of the things it has never been called is “simple.” The brainchild of Ubisoft Montreal, *Far Cry 2* is complicated: the game is fairly unforgiving but rewards second and third play-throughs, the ending and story seem thin but it is engaging enough to make one view morally repugnant choices as ordinary, and the characters are largely interchangeable except for a select few that are more skillfully drawn than either Vaas or Pagan Min in the sequels. Taking its inspiration from Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and set in an unnamed African country that is quickly spiraling into bloody chaos, the game also has a complex relationship with Africa. Only rarely does the more troublesome aspect of imperialism ([2]) or cultural hegemony enter into the discussion. In fact, to my knowledge the only close analysis of *Far Cry 2* from a postcolonial viewpoint has been undertaken by Jorge Albor (2010) in the pages of this journal’s sister publication. Concluding that the game “dismantles popular notions of foreign actors in conflict zones...while simultaneously bolstering a

contentious political ideology” that can best be described as “a doomed Africa, collapsing under incessant violence,” Albor focuses on the political depiction of Africa (2010, pp. 206, 205).

I see the following examination as a companion to and extension of Albor’s work. Whereas he takes *Far Cry 2*’s characters and their actions as objects of postcolonial study, I take the game’s depiction of the setting itself as my object. Specifically focusing on the symbolic freight of malaria in the game, I find a link between in-game representations of malaria, the idea that Africa produces disease *ex terra*, and the larger Africanist ([3]) discourse which characterizes it as a dangerous and resistant place—a “dark” continent in every sense of the word. Because there is a pre-existing discourse about Africa from which *Far Cry 2* borrows and in which we must contextualize it, the only conclusion I can reach is that the game distills and reimagines elements of Africanist discourse, further propagating the conception and creation of an Africa that is dangerous and resistant.

II: Welcome to Africa, Enjoy Your Malaria

It may seem odd, I admit, to focus on malaria, especially to those readers who have played *Far Cry 2* and are aware of its relatively minor impact on the narrative and gameplay. I may seem odder still that I do not dispute the above characterization. Malaria is minor to the narrative and gameplay—but that is not all there is to a video game. Depending on one’s point of view, a relatively unimportant item (a crucifix to an ancient Roman as opposed to a crucifix to a Christian, for example) can take on different levels of signification. So it is, I argue, with *Far Cry 2*’s malaria.

The game hints that malaria is more important than it lets on. Whereas it is relatively inconsequential to either the narrative or gameplay, *Far Cry 2* simply will not let the player forget about the disease. For instance, the game uses a novel visual approach to

communicate symptoms. In the introductory stages of the game, the wildly tilting field of vision and increased image blur do a nice job of conveying dizziness. When combined with frequent fade-outs and a soft focus/vignetting effect that represents tunnel vision, the player also gets a sense of a throbbing headache. After the introductory stages, however, visual representations decrease considerably, appearing only during the recurring bouts of malaria. In these instances, the screen fills with a sickly, mucus-yellow haze, and translucent protozoa appear around the field of vision (see Figure 1).

Malaria also sporadically affects gameplay. Known symptoms such as coughing and weakness/fatigue affect the player-character's stamina for sprinting or holding his breath underwater. Depending on the severity of the disease (conveyed by a scale of one to five in the game), every thirty to forty-five minutes of real time the player-character suffers a bout of illness that clouds the vision and makes simple actions like driving a car more difficult. Allowing the disease to remain untreated will eventually result in a fatal attack. Unless the player has undertaken a permanent death campaign of his/her own devising, this is not an issue because the player character simply re-spawns in the nearest Underground safehouse and is given a mission in order to earn medicine. At its worst levels, the disease is a minor annoyance, an element that forces the player-character to complete side missions. For the most part, however, it never reaches its worst levels because the medicine available in the game is very effective, so that malaria "renders the gameplay mechanic meaningless" and turns into "a frustrating distraction to the core gameplay" (Ryan, 2012).



Figure 1. A bout of malaria, featuring protozoa around the edges of the frame.

The most frequent and least effective representation of malaria is exposition. Before the player even gets control, the antagonist (an arms dealer named The Jackal) makes the diagnosis. Following a short tutorial, our first handler reminds us that we have malaria and that it is dangerous. After a few more short tutorial missions, a kindly priest comments on how sick we are before giving us medicine. Exposition, by way of journal entries, also conveys the seriousness of the disease. For instance, when the disease is at its worst, the entry reads: “Shakes, sweating, fever. Convulsions are severe. Feel like I could die.” At level three: “My fever’s high. I’m vomiting. That’s a bundle of fun. The joint pain won’t go away. Add to that the head-to-toe shivers and I got myself a party.” This is how we know that the player-character has malaria. Every symptom shown visually or through gameplay could be the result of getting a bad burger at the Kampala Holiday Inn Express, so it falls to spoken dialogue to make the distinction.

Narratively, malaria bookends the action of the game, but does not make an appreciable impact on the story itself. In the introductory sequences, as I’ve stated, malaria is stressed but

does not affect the relationship with The Jackal or the overarching mission at hand (to kill him). In fact, by the time the game progresses to the second map section it is fairly easy to reduce the sickness level to zero, but in the final point-of-no-return map section, it returns to level five no matter what it was before. Perhaps this makes sense: the severity of the disease leaves little hope for the player-character's future, making the choice to die easier. Its impact is blunted, however, by the but-thou-must loop of the ending. There is no way forward but to agree to The Jackal's suicide-pact plan, so the severity of the disease is almost incidental to the player-character's final doom.

The above description of malaria's depiction coupled with the complaints voiced by writers such as Ryan demonstrate pretty clearly that both the representation and function of the disease in *Far Cry 2* is ancillary at best. ([4]) But what I want to emphasize is that its thin representation and minor impact on gameplay actually ratchets up malaria's symbolic import: it simply has no other function. Because the game continuously reminds the player that his/her character has malaria but does little to show the disease through narrative or gameplay effects, it functions as a signifier of Africa, another example of the continent's danger and resistance to Western incursion.

To understand malaria's connotative force—in *Far Cry 2* and in the West, generally—consider that HIV/AIDS and lower respiratory infections are both deadlier medical conditions in Sub-Saharan regions (Rao, Lopez, and Hemed, 2006). For a game that is, as L.B. Jeffries (2009) observed, “incessantly hostile,” the most dangerous option would seem inviting. Obviously, the connotations of HIV/AIDS and its relatively slow progression present challenges that an FPS developer would have little reason to tackle. These obstacles, however, do not apply to respiratory infection, so it was likely ignored because anyone anywhere can get it. A lower respiratory infection simply doesn't evoke Africa the way malaria does. This is the premise of my analysis. The

connection of malaria and Africa is a well-worn trope, contributing to and/or furthering an imperialist view of the continent that characterizes it as resistant and dangerous.

The problems with this representational connection are legion. Setting aside my earlier observation that malaria is not even the most common cause of death, there is still the false implication that malaria is somehow particular to Africa. Since malaria is almost unknown in the United States and Western Europe, it is easy to forget that in the past it was a real threat to every continent but Antarctica. In his *Ecological Imperialism* (2004), Alfred Crosby observes that malaria was still commonplace in the East of England and East Midlands well into the 1800s, and during the same era “was the most important sickness in the entire Mississippi Valley” (pp. 65, 208). ([5]) Even as malaria was killing people in England, however, Westerners such as Henry M. Stanley and Richard Francis Burton began to construct a symbolic complex that associated Africa’s fecundity with malaria. Stanley (1872), for instance, reports on “sloughs of black mud,” “over-tall grasses,” and the “miasmatic jungle with its noxious emissions” (p. 81). Burton provides a telling description of Tanzania, so I quote him at length:

Beyond the cultivation the route plunges into a jungle, where the European traveller realises every preconceived idea of Africa’s aspect, at once hideous and grotesque...The black greasy ground, veiled with thick shrubbery, supports in the more open spaces screens of tiger and spear-grass, twelve and thirteen feet high, with every blade a finger’s breadth...The foot-paths, in places “dead,”—as the natives say,—with encroaching bush, are crossed by lianas, creepers and climbers...frequently crossing one another like network and stunting the growth of even the vivacious calabash, by coils like rope tightly encircling its neck. The earth, ever rain-drenched, emits the odour of sulphuretted hydrogen, and in some parts the traveller might fancy a corpse to be

hidden behind every bush. To this sad picture of miasma the firmament is a fitting frame: a wild sky, whose heavy purple nimbi, chased by raffales and chilling gusts, dissolve in large-dropped showers; or a dull, dark grey expanse, which lies like a pall over the world. In the finer weather the atmosphere is pale and sickly; its mists and vapours seem to concentrate the rays of the oppressive “rain-sun.”

(Burton, 1860, pp. 91-92)

In these two examples, Africa is overly fertile, with “over-tall grasses” and “greasy,” “veiled” vegetation. It is wild and its flora so chaotic and aggressive that it strangles the one cultivated crop, the calabash. This image of strangulation is especially interesting, considering how the very air itself seems to suffocate each author. Stanley complains of the jungle’s “noxious emissions,” while Burton describes both the sulfuric stench that smells like a rotting corpse and the “pale and sickly” atmosphere in even the best weather. Nothing in their description of the air is positive. “Noxious” at best denotes harm and at worst denotes poison. “Sulphuretted hydrogen” is what we now call hydrogen sulfide (swamp or sewer gas), which is poisonous and smells like rotten eggs. Furthermore, the atmosphere of the jungle landscape is depicted in terms of sickness and death: “pall” (2005) denotes a darkening or gloominess (but also connotes death since its now-obsolete use was to denote the cloth spread over a coffin), “pale” (2005) denotes a loss of color (which can also mean growing dim), and “sickly” provides the source of that dimness.



Figure 2. The “Heart of Darkness” map area of *Far Cry 2*.

Far Cry 2 is not so overt as Burton or Stanley. It never explicitly identifies jungle areas as sources of disease, but it does imply that parts of Africa are miasmatic sloughs. Scenes such the one shown in Figure 2 are common in the game. The hazy jungle foregrounded by standing vegetation on each side and water lilies (none with flowers) covering the opaque, olive drab water seem to create a faithful representation of Burton’s “mists and vapours” and “veiled” ground. The vision clouded by the sulfur-yellow haze during sick flashes (see Figure 1) seems a direct descendant of this earlier signficatory complex: it is a spot-on visual representation of Stanley’s “noxious emissions” and Burton’s “odour of sulphuretted hydrogen.”

To further link African jungles to sickness, both Stanley and Burton use a form of the word *miasma*, which had a particular connotation in the nineteenth century. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a *miasma* (2001) was “formerly believed to be the carrier of various infections, esp. malaria.” Burton and Stanley produced popular texts about Central Africa, and in their work we can see the beginnings of two assumptions—first that African fecundity is associated with unhealthy air and second that this unhealthy air spawns disease, specifically malaria. *Far*

Cry 2 never uses the word, but its depiction of malaria is reliant on the miasmatic theory of disease. Instead of showing the foul air wafting up out of vegetation, the game ties it directly to the symptoms, showing the sickly yellow haze only during a bout of the disease with which it is connected. The protozoa that crowd the edges of the screen further establish this haze as the result of malaria. This creates something like a causal symbolic chain in which the disease is directly linked to the sulfur-yellow haze, the haze itself linked to miasmatic air, and the air linked to Africa.

Such a reading is not too far-fetched. Malaria, we should remember, is an infectious disease, so it is an easy transition from the reality of an infectious disease *associated with Africa* to the symbolism of an *infection by Africa* via the disease. ([6]) Going well beyond associating the disease with a particular setting, *Far Cry 2* envisions malaria as an extension of Africa, a means by which the hostile land invades and overcomes the Western encroacher. Though it is subtle, the game's depiction of malaria is a significant (in both senses of the word) indicator of how the West in general sees the relationship of Africa and malaria.

The purpose of malaria in-game is to signify the hostility and danger of Africa, of the place itself. That it is, above all, dangerous is one of the first lessons we learn about *Far Cry 2*'s Africa. The initial cinematic depicts depopulation, raging wildfires, and militia checkpoints that seem to outnumber noncombatants, all three of which suggest that Africans themselves are dangerous or that the player is operating in an Other world whose new rules he/she must learn. With malaria, however, things are different. In the scene, the player-character—a veteran mercenary sent to kill The Jackal, one of the most dangerous arms dealers in the world—barely survives the cab ride to the hotel. He passes out in the cab, wakes up in a hotel room staring at The Jackal, passes out, wakes up in the middle of a firefight, fights, and then passes out again. In addition to the political statement uncovered by Albor, malaria's connection

to Africa suggests a geographical statement in the game: militias and fires begun by Molotov cocktails are certainly a danger, but Africa, not Africans, is also dangerous and is actively trying to kill the player-character. What the game does is not merely to evoke Africa with malaria, but to employ it as a metonymic representation that signifies Africa. In doing so, *Far Cry 2* participates in a well-worn trope that has been used to justify an imperialist view of the continent as resistant and dangerous.

III: Neo-colonialism, Orientalism, Representation

The following section will be of interests mostly to those who are unfamiliar with postcolonial theory; those with a working knowledge of Edward Said's ideas in *Orientalism* are invited to skip to the next section.

I want to pause in my discussion of malaria in *Far Cry 2* to point out some of the larger contours of colonialist and imperialist thought as it pertains to the above discussion and below conclusions. Said's *Orientalism* (1994), which is largely responsible for the rise of post-colonial studies, defines Orientalism itself as:

the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient...In brief, because of Orientalism the Orient was not (and is not) a free subject of thought or action.
(Said, 1994, p. 3)

As a “corporate institution,” Orientalism is not a plan hatched by some evil Westerner, but is instead the product of a way of thinking about the East. This viewpoint, Said later states, is a “textual attitude,” appearing in discourse (a particular set of rules and traditions that form the way we think and talk

about specific subjects) in the form of histories, novels, movies, anthropological studies, and even laws. For the purposes of this study, the corporate nature of Orientalism, the textual attitude of the West, and the West's authority over the Orient form the core ideas of postcolonial theory, though, to be sure, there are other elements of Said's work and other theorists that might just as readily apply.

Orientalism is corporate in that one cannot point to a single individual as the culprit. It is fragmented, diffused throughout the West, and it is no more (or less) a product of Napoleon's writings about Egypt than it is Mankiewicz's 1963 *Cleopatra*. Instead, it is a form of soft power, for Orientalism "is an *elaboration* not only of a basic geographical distinction...but also of a whole series of 'interests' which, by such means as scholarly discovery, philological reconstruction, psychological analysis, landscape and sociological description, it not only creates but also maintains" (Said, 1994, p. 12).

Since most Westerners have never been to Africa, our way of seeing it has largely been textual, and this, for Said, is the mechanism by which Orientalism is propagated. He explains how the "textual attitudes" of this discourse grow to such dominance that they crowd out other ways of seeing the Orient. Walker Percy (2000) gives us an excellent example of this textual attitude: he posits a hypothetical Midwestern couple getting lost in Mexico and stumbling on a small village in the midst of a corn festival. Instead of experiencing the festival directly, the pair experiences a "rather desperate impersonation" because they view the whole affair as a performance of the "real" Mexico. Taking the hypothetical further, Percy imagines the couple speaking to an ethnologist friend and telling him of their experience; this is, Percy argues, "not to share their experience, but to certify their experience as genuine" (Percy, 2000, pp. 51-54). For both Percy and Said, the textual attitude, the ability to know Mexico, Egypt, or Uganda without ever having set foot

in the country, is based in what has already been said and written about it.

The textual attitude, if it propagates over the years and decades, allows those who hold it to gain authority over the place that is known. For example, Napoleon conducts an expedition into Egypt with over one hundred scholars, and they produce the *Description de l'Égypte* about (among other things) its social and governmental structure. The Rosetta Stone allows Westerners to decipher Egyptian hieroglyphics, and Egyptologists write books about the language. Howard Carter rediscovers Tutankhamun's tomb, and Egyptologists write books about Egyptian material culture, kingship, and burial customs. In these three examples, Western experts are seen as having gained more knowledge about Egypt than the Egyptians living there. And this knowledge, argues Said, "because generated out of strength, in a sense *creates* the Orient, the Oriental, and his world" (1994, p. 40). That is, the textual attitude—because those producing it have intellectual or political authority over whatever aspect of the Orient is being discussed—fashions *an* Orient for those in the West that may or may not bear any resemblance to any *real* Orient. Believing that we know it through what has been written about it, we treat it, think about it, and speak about it accordingly.

IV: Conclusions and Implications

Just as there is an Orientalist discourse about the Middle East and Asia, there is a discourse in the West about Africa. This Africanist discourse, if we might call it that, functions in the same manner as Orientalist discourse and has a history and scope to match it. Beginning with Pliny (1st cent. CE), "experts" have made "authoritative" statements about the continent. The Hereford mappa mundi (14th cent. CE) is a cartographic statement that separates Africa from Europe and places monsters in the former. Georg Hegel's *Philosophy of History* (1830) makes

historical statements by concluding that Africa has unequal historical footing as compared to the West. Burton and Stanley (1860s and 70s) make eyewitness statements about the character of the landscape. In *Races of Africa* (1930) Charles G. Seligman makes anthropological statements and divide the different “races” of the continent by skull size, hair type, language, primitiveness, etc. Lastly, Albert Schweitzer’s many interviews (1950s-60s) make spiritual statements which classify Africans as less spiritually mature than Westerners. Taken together, this discourse creates, in the minds of Westerners, an Africa that is a “metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at his peril,” which leads to “the dehumanization of Africa and Africans which this age-long attitude has fostered and continues to foster in the world” (Achebe, 1977, p. 788). Once Africanist discourse has been thoroughly shaped by the experts, it begins to seep into less “authoritative” but more impactful texts. After the cartographers and historians come Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899), Florida’s Africa USA theme park (1953), *The Gods Must be Crazy* (1980), *Outbreak* (1995), and a flurry of films about African socio-political conflicts in 2005 and 2006 (*Lord of War*, *Blood Diamond*, and *The Last Kind of Scotland*). By 2008, the scene has pretty well been set: what Africa looks like and what Africa *is* was established before *Far Cry 2* was ever released.

In *Far Cry 2*, malaria is a single cog in the game’s discursive relationship with Africa, and the game itself is a single cog in a larger Africanist discourse. It is a testament to the power and ubiquity of that discourse that few have noticed that *Far Cry 2*’s Africa is just *an* Africa. Unsurprisingly then, even fewer have thought to ask why none of the choices for player-characters are native Africans or why players see no structures like Kenya’s Uhuru Gardens or why the player-character gets malaria instead of a respiratory infection. Most of us (including me, for at least four years) do not notice anything amiss because the Africa in

Far Cry 2 is the Africa we expect. It has been reinforced by the authority of our works in the West, our own textual attitude toward the continent, and the corporate nature of the discourse itself.

This is what makes seemingly insignificant game elements such as malaria truly significant. Because the vast majority of those who play the game have never been and will never go to central Africa, we depend on Africanist discourse to “know” it. *Far Cry 2* relies on this discourse to make an image of Africa, but it also contributes to that discourse, making statements about the continent to a demographic that other media may never reach. It adds its voice to KONY2012 videos, movies about Somali pirates, jokes about Nigerian scams, and fear-mongering news stories about ebola to stitch together an Africa that invites a certain kind of thinking—and therefore action—on the part of the West. This Africa invites pity, intervention, aid, and exploitation instead of the sort of partnership, cooperation, and understanding that we might extend to Australia, Israel, or Sweden. That is the real legacy of *Far Cry 2*, and for as long as Africanist discourse continues, it is our legacy in the West, too.

Endnotes

([1]) See Robin Burkinshaw. (2008). *Far Cry 2: Who am I?* *roBurky*. Retrieved from <http://www.roburky.co.uk/2008/11/far-cry-2-who-am-i/>; Edge. (2008). *Far Cry 2's heart of darkness*. *Edge*. Retrieved from <http://www.edge-online.com/features/feature-far-cry-2s-heart-darkness/?page=0%2C2>; L.B. Jeffries. (2009); Mitch Krpata. (2008). *Going native*. *The Phoenix, Boston*. Retrieved from <http://thephoenix.com/Boston/recroom/71835-far-cry-2/>; Alec Meer. (2014). *Another Life, Another Time: Far Cry 2 Revisited*. *Rock Paper Shotgun*. Retrieved from www.rockpapershotgun.com/2014/02/14/far-cry-2-retrospective/; and Iroquois Pliskin. (2008). *Seeing Africa, Down the Barrel of a Gun*. *Versus CluClu Land*. Retrieved from

<http://versusclucluland.blogspot.com/2008/12/seeing-africa-down-barrel-of-gun.html>.

([2]) When I use the terms *imperialism* and *colonialism*, I am following a specific set of definitions. They are drawn from Edward Said, who defines imperialism as “the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan center ruling a distant territory” and colonialism as “a consequence of imperialism” and “the implanting of settlements on a distant territory” (p. 9). See Edward Said. (1993). *Culture and imperialism*. New York: Vintage.

([3]) Although I am aware that Toni Morrison has previously used the term “Africanist” in *Playing in the Dark* as a position phrase and a call to action, Edward Said’s concept of Orientalist discourse leads me to adapt and adopt the term with a less positive denotation (see section III). See Toni Morrison. (1991). *Playing in the dark*. New York: Vintage.

([4]) One can clearly tell from interviews with the game developers that the malaria of *Far Cry 2* is not what they had in mind. Redding discusses disfigurement, vomiting, etc. as outcomes of the disease in the latter stages of the game, which may mean that some of the elements were cut pre-release. Be that as it may, my concern in this examination is not what the designers meant to create or what they thought they were doing. Just as *Far Cry 2* cannot be held up as evidence of some malignant racism on the part of the developers, their intentions cannot mitigate the effects of game on those playing it.

([5]) That threat is no longer with us in the West because of our widespread use of insecticides such as Paris Green and DDT. Africa, Asia, and equatorial portions of South America, however, did not enjoy such large-scale eradication programs before DDT was slowly phased out between 1968 and 1984 amid health concerns. We are essentially safe from the disease because we

used insecticides that are now considered unsafe and that developing nations are strongly encouraged to avoid.

([6]) As a sort of third-party confirmation of this reading, I would point out that Redding (2008) himself supports it. Although he likely would not share my postcolonial interpretation, when he states that *Far Cry 2*'s malaria is "not just a parasite, but...the literal possession of the infected by the land itself," Redding is explicitly connecting malaria to Africa and its geography. See Redding, P. (2008). *GDC 2008: Slides for "Do, don't show"* [PowerPoint slides]. Retrieved from <http://holesintooth.typepad.com/blogginess/2008/03/gdc-2008-slides.html>

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DO CYBORGS DREAM OF THE PERFECT PUMP?: WARFRAME AND GENDER

By Timothy Welsh

Do Cyborgs Dream of the Perfect Pump?

During November 2014, Digital Extremes (DE) ran a charity promotion through their popular free-to-play game *Warframe* (2012) supporting the Movember Foundation. The Movember Foundation has gained some notoriety recently for asking supporters to grow a moustache during the month of November—hence Mo(ustache)-vember—in order to raise awareness for men’s health issues. For DE’s “Moframe,” as they called it, players could adorn their in-game avatars with moustaches, with new and more elaborate versions unlocked as the promotion reached donation goals. To announce the event, publicize received donations, and showcase the unlockable moustaches, DE created a Moframe website featuring two playable avatars donning ‘staches: Excalibur and Mag. While there is no surprise that Excalibur, the first warframe and posterchild of the game, appears on the site, Mag’s presence is somewhat unexpected. The Mag avatar is assigned female, and yet the site shows her trying on an assortment of facial hair (see Figure 1).

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Figure 1. Moframe website featuring Mag

During the Moframe promotion, DE allowed female-assigned warframes as well as the male-assigned to put on the Movember moustaches. Of course, DE would not want to suggest that only frames marked as male could participate in Movember or that men’s health is only a male issue. In fact, putting a moustache on Mag and other female-assigned frames highlights the obvious

and awkward bias of Movember itself. I point it out here because *Warframe's* Movember promotion exemplifies the complexity and slipperiness of gender in *Warframe's* posthuman environment.

The discussion of gender in videogames has tended to focus on representation (Sarkeesian, 2014; Cassell and Jenkins, 2000). Though there is plenty to say about gendered tropes in *Warframe*, representational signifiers circulate through the game in unexpected ways. The game's customization options and narrative setting offer the possibility and flexibility to realize hybrid configurations that undermine established tropes through gameplay. And yet, these configurations are articulated through a persistent gender binary. What I want to suggest is that playing *Warframe* thus reflects or, rather, enacts the condition of its players, whose participation in digital culture allows play with and between gendered signifiers though never without the residual binary structure.

* * *

My interest in gender in *Warframe* began with a somewhat obvious observation. Saryn, another of the playable warframes, despite not appearing to wear clothing of any kind, has on high-heel boots (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Promotional image for Saryn

Of course, pumps are not very practical attire for a space ninja. Female avatars adorning impractical clothing are not uncommon in videogames, though. Female armor variants, for instance, famously offer contradictorily little coverage. Putting female avatars into high heels is not uncommon either. What differentiates *Warframe's* use here is that, within the context of the game's lore, not only is this styling choice impractical, it is nonsensical.

Saryn is one of the over twenty “warframes,” or suits of wearable technology created by the Orokin as a last attempt to defeat the Sentinels. The story of *Warframe* is sparse, complicated, and subject to change with each game update, so I won't go too far into it here (1). The part that is interesting for this discussion is that the warframes could be worn and wielded only by Tenno, select humans who survived Orokin experimentation. Exactly how the Orokin made the Tenno is unclear: some kind of DNA manipulation involving a weaponized, nanotech virus called Technocyte created by the US during the Cold War. Likewise it isn't clear how the humans who became Tenno were changed. Numerous posts on the *Warframe* forums debate this topic, postulating, for example, that the Tenno are merely husks, their humanity burnt out by the virus, or that—my personal

favorite—all that remains from the Orokin experiments are beings of pure energy. What is clear, though, is that they are not human any more. Regardless of what specifically has happened to these former humans, the Tenno are literally and irreparably *post-human*.

Part of the reason it is unclear what happened to the Tenno—aside from the sparseness of the lore—is that players never *see* any. Through update 17.5, Tenno have never been represented on screen. Instead, *Warframe* characterizes its players as the Tenno, the ancient race of mutated humans awoken from cryo-sleep to operate warframes. In the first cut scene of the tutorial level, The Lotus, mentor of the Tenno, addresses the player, “You are a Tenno, and I will prepare you.” This positioning extends to the game’s marketing, developer videos, social media, and forums, all of which use “Tenno” to name the game’s player base. Rather than taking on Tenno form as playable avatar, though, the player only ever interacts with the on-screen environment with a warframe. The game thus establishes a comparison between the fictional Tenno as operator of a warframe and the real player as operator of an avatar, indeed overlapping their positions.

This avatar within an avatar provides a convenient way to incorporate a core game mechanic into the game’s narrative without fracturing the fictional world. The Tenno/players are not their warframes, but warframe operators. They may wear any one of the available frames in their inventory and thereby alter their abilities and playstyle to fit different situations, game modes, and party configurations (see Figure 3). The player, then, is not restricted to only one class of character for the entirety of the game, in contrast with the standard MMO, like *World of Warcraft* (2004), in which the player plays the entire game as a Night Elf Priest or must start fresh at the beginning with a brand new character (see Nardi, 2010). The player can and is encouraged—through the game’s Mastery Rank system—to

acquire and rank up each and every available warframe. The warframe, then, is not the character, but a tool or weapon wielded by the Tenno/player.



Figure 3. Selecting a warframe from the Arsenal menu

The ability to collect and choose between warframes grants players a great deal of flexibility, allowing them to experiment with different loadouts for different mission types. Couched in a narrative of posthuman adaptability, switching between suits remains consistent with the game's story world as well. But, it also raises questions about identity performance and gender expression in the *Warframe* universe. Which brings me back to Saryn's high-heeled boots.

Saryn presents obviously as female and takes feminine pronouns in the game's codex. But, Saryn is a suit of armor, not the post-human being operating it. As far as I understand from the available lore through update 17.5, the Tenno are anatomically asexual and post-gender. The Saryn frame's womanly features do not correspond to the body-shape of its wearer. It seems reasonable to ask, then, not only why does Saryn have boots, but why does she even have breasts?

Even if we assume that the Tenno operating Saryn is or was at one point anatomically female, she can and does wear each of the

available warframes, regardless of shape or gender assignment. With no correspondence to the assignment of the operator and no functional effect on gameplay, Saryn's high-heels and anatomically female figure appear to be merely cosmetic, intended primarily to mark the frame as female, *Warframe's* version of Ms. Pacman's bow (see Sarkeesian 2014). We might consider, then, the Tenno/player's arsenal of playable warframes a collection of selectable, interchangeable gender performances.

* * *

It is not difficult to look at Saryn's unnecessary high-heels and buxom body model and recognize that *Warframe* includes some problematic gender representations. On top of the boots, Saryn poisons her enemies, has a flower-themed design, wears a set of helmets that resemble hairstyles, and has the ability to shed her skin, making her, as the codex puts it, "very elusive." The weary critic might roll their eyes at frames such as Nyx, whose powers revolve around mind control, or Mirage, the slender harlequin in sexy posture, who creates illusions, sabotages equipment, and throws out an area-of-effect ability that can only be described as a disco ball (see Figure 4).

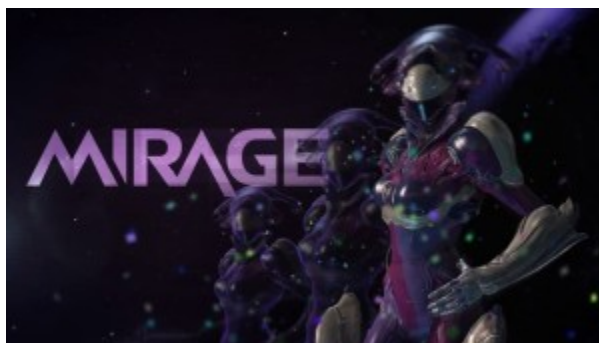


Figure 4. Promotional image for Mirage

Perhaps the most egregious frame design is Valkyr. According to her codex entry, "The original Valkyr was subject to cruel

experiments, leaving her scarred, angry and frighteningly adept at killing.” This cat-suited, abuse victim channels her “feral rage” into a berserker playstyle buffeted by an ultimate ability called “Hysteria,” in which she screams, produces claws, and becomes invincible for a duration. The *Warframe* community has dubbed this “PMS mode,” simultaneously a sexist quip and insightful critique.

Male-gendered warframes also play on archetypes; however, their models have none of the cynicism of the female-assigned frames. Compare Saryn in high-heeled boots to Limbo, the slender magician, in a top hat. Male assigned frames include Rhino, the bulky tank, Vauban, the tactical engineer, Oberon, the hooved paladin, and Hydroid, the pirate. Because male is the assumed default category (Nakamura, 2002; Sarkeesian, 2013), these themes seem neutral, almost genderless. Yet, several of the types applied to female-assigned frames carry histories and meanings that are not easily neutralized.

For example, there is a warframe themed with each of the game’s four base elemental damage types: Toxin (Saryn) and Heat (Ember) are female, while Cold (Frost) and Electricity (Volt) are male. Though equitably split so that both genders have equal elemental representation, the way they embody these properties are not equivalent. Applied to female-assigned frames, poison and heat carry sexual and sexualizing connotations that cold and electricity do not confer on the male-assigned frames.

Clearly, warframe designs make use of sexist female archetypes, ones that sadly appear all too often in videogames. The female-assigned frames may be merely suits of armor for posthuman operators and do not correspond to the sex assignment of the player’s avatar; even so, they constitute composed performances of gender through their model designs, abilities, and theming. These performances carry over into gameplay. Playing as the female-marked Nyx involves controlling the battlefield by

mentally manipulating the opposition. Players using Valkyr invoke the trope of the hysterical woman every time they activate her ultimate ability. And, yet, these performances are not completely stable.

For instance, a player might apply mod cards to these troped frames that emphasize different abilities and uses. An alternative Nyx build focuses on her ultimate, which stores and releases incoming damage from both enemies and allies, making her a deadly damage dealer (The “WiseKrakr” in Games, 2015). Though less common, a Valkyr build based on her second and third abilities, which grant melee attack speed and an area of effect stun respectively, de-emphasizes her ultimate, changing her role from hysterical damage dealer to a utility crowd controller (GayGuyPlays, 2014). In short, players pick up, put down, and customize their frames for a variety of play modes and purposes. This variability in playstyle does not erase problematic tropes, nor does it prevent them from carrying into gameplay. It does, however, enable gendered compositions to be played differently.

* * *

Lisa Nakamura (2002) cautions that when looking for the ways identity is configured in digital spaces, we can't attend only to “the content of the text,” but must also consider the “forms” and unique aspects of the medium (p. 111). She describes how the affordances of digital media can result in “menu-driven identities,” or the way race—and by extension other identity categories—is reduced to selectable list items. This practice, she notes, renders invisible mestiza identities, self-representations that fall between available options.

The determining factor in menu-driven reductivism, according to Nakamura, is whether the system can “describe something so complex as the ‘multiple states’ occupied by users whose

identities are hybrid to any extent” (p. 114). She references Donna Haraway’s cyborg as one such “border creature, a human/machine construct that challenges dichotomies of identity and carves out new hybrid spaces of being” (Nakamura, 2002, p. 113). The question for *Warframe*, then, is whether the posthuman, cyborg identity it confers on its players allows them to reconfigure their received menu-driven warframes into hybrid “border creatures.”

The gender presentation of individual warframes does, to some extent, produce the kind of menu-driven reductivism Nakamura describes. Players select only one warframe for a mission, the individual frames each a kind of composed gender performance. Yet, the player’s presence in *Warframe* is never limited to one performance for more than a single mission. Rather, it is distributed into the full complement of frames he or she has available. The Tenno/player is all warframes and none of them. In this sense, the player’s interaction with the virtual environment of *Warframe* is fundamentally hybrid, in-between, as no single performance or play session encompasses the entirety of their in-game presence.

Furthermore, though players cannot change a frame’s theming and abilities—when they select a frame for a mission they also carry its gender assignment and signifiers into battle—they can and do customize their warframes. Some customizations options are merely aesthetic, changing a frame’s coloring, accessories, or animation packages, while others, such as the mod cards that enhance or diminish a frame’s abilities and characteristics, have strategic, gameplay value. Thus, while the warframe designs include questionable gendered performances, they do not constitute a stable, in-game identity. The warframes, each an amalgamation of tropes and potential resistances, offer flexibility, adaptability, and customization to facilitate different playstyles, group roles, and self-representation.

Playing these gendered female frames well often results in undermining the tropes they invoke. Trinity, for example, is themed as a healer, support frame. With no offensive abilities, her design recalls tropes of female as non-aggressive caregiver. A well-modded Trinity, however, becomes the best tank in the game, an undying battery that powers her team's abilities through the highest level mission (see H3dsh0t, April 2015). Banshee, contrary to the image of the shrieking woman her name invokes, silences her team's movement and gunfire, uses sonar to covertly locate enemies, and massively buffs her team's damage output by highlighting enemy weak points (see H3dsh0t, January 2015). Saryn, too, when effectively modded by players, reconfigures the gendered trope of the femme fatale. Rather than covertly poisoning assassination targets, a standard build for Saryn turns her ultimate ability into an instantaneous toxic nuke. With her high armor and health statistics, players can modify her to be a completely viable tank as well (see CalypsoGaming, 2014).

Even hysterical Valkyr can be played against type. In higher-level team play, for example, the Wolverine-like invulnerability granted by her ultimate ability makes her extremely useful for tasks that have the potential for extended exposure to enemy attacks, tasks like hacking consoles, activating life support, and reviving fallen teammates. Such support roles are not typically associated with being hysterical and, furthermore, would seem to contradict that characterization. Though gendered compositions like Valkyr's remain problematic, occasionally the requirements and opportunities of gameplay put players in position to enact them in unexpected ways and ways that can unsettle tropes.

Not all the warframe designs follow traditional gender stereotypes. Though dismissively called "Cowgirl" in the game's code prior to release, Mesa, the gunslinger frame, was introduced in promotional clips as a female Dirty Harry. Her slender body model features a modified duster jacket, cowboy boots with spurs, and a blindfold, which, her designer explained during

Warframe Devstream 41, she wears for a greater challenge (PlayWarframe, 2014, see Figure 5). Mag uses magnetic powers to disrupt enemy shields and crush them like a trash compactor. Then there is Zephyr, a hybrid human/bird frame marked as female.

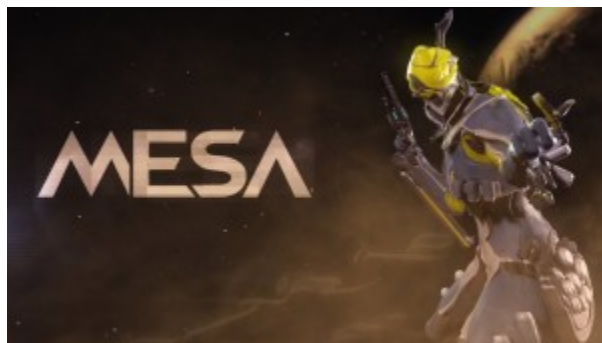


Figure 5. Promotional image for Mesa

In most circumstance, though, the creation of hybrids results from players manipulating customizable options. As Adrienne Shaw (2014) writes, the representation of marginalized groups in games typically “is placed in the hands of the players” (p. 35). For instance, a common way *Warframe* players play against type is by applying an animation set to a warframe of alternately declared gender. Each frame comes with three custom idle animations, which determine the frame’s posture and behavior when not receiving player input. As of update 15, players could purchase an animation set with in-game currency, and unlock it for use with any frame. Two specific animation sets proved immediately popular. First, Mirage’s “Noble” animation, in which she places a hand on her hip and blows a kiss. Once the option to apply this animation to other frames, players, such as popular *Warframe* YouTuber Quiette Shy, began experimenting with putting it on all frames, including those assigned male (see Figure 6). Before Quiette Shy’s channel was terminated, the video has received over 45,000 views.



Figure 6. *Quiette Shy*, “WARFRAME – MIRAGE NOBLE ANIMATION SET ON ALL WARFRAMES” (2014).

Another popular animation set is Limbo’s “Agile” animation. When applied to Limbo, the magician frame, he looks like a wizard prone to cast a spell. When applied to Rhino, however, the particular composition of the frame’s lower torso—designed to resemble a rhinoceros’ tale—protrudes upward. A long-standing joke within the community about Rhino’s well-endowed character design is thereby exaggerated when enacting Limbo’s animation. Playing off the unexpected result of combining frame and animation, Mogamu (2015), perhaps the most famous *Warframe* YouTuber, created a Valentine’s Day video featuring a Rhino made up in a pink color scheme slowly gyrating with Limbo’s “Agile” animation while romantic jazz plays in the background (see Figure 7). His playful video had nearly 43,000 views at time of writing.



Figure 7. Mogamu, “Happy Valen’ Tenno” (2015)

In these examples, players use customizable options to upset and reconfigure gender performance of the designer’s compositions. They demonstrate the possibility within *Warframe* to work within and against the established identity assignments to create new hybrids. This flexibility is not without cost, however.

* * *

Warframe includes problematic representations of gender alongside ones that recalibrate gender expectations. In both cases, though, the specific embodiment of character model, statistics, abilities and appearance—the stealth Banshee, the victimized hysteric Valkyr, the tank-y buxom Saryn—are not configurable by the player. The frames, with their archetypal themes and gender assignments, thus constitute composed identity performances, which thereby have the capacity to reinforce gender stereotypes. This potential is undercut, to some degree, by the player’s ability to take each composed persona on or off at will as well as customize them to reinforce or undermine their performance and presentation. These archetypes belong to the user’s arsenal, enabling infinite and hybrid reconfigurations of their fluid in-game presence.

And, yet, the units themselves carry with them their gendered significations. As in the examples above, Mirage’s idle animation

undermines the hyper masculine presentation of the male frames only to the extent that it signifies as feminine. In this sense, the player's fluid presentation relies on the circulation of calcified gendered signifiers. This has the dual effect of naturalizing binary gender as well as decoupling gender from embodied experience. The flexibility of *Warframe*, thus, manages to "take all comers under the mantel of continuity and universalism," without challenging the categories (Galloway, 2005, p. 101). Even in its hybridity, *Warframe* remains situated under the binary tentpoles of male and female. This is perhaps most clearly articulated by the way the gender binary continues to structure a game that, at least narratively, invokes a post-gender future.

For instance, originally, DE considered having male and female versions of individual frames. Nyx, the mind-control frame, was first conceived as the female version of Excalibur. The visual similarity, even in the final design, is obvious (see Figures 8 and 9).



Figure 8. Digital Extremes concept art for female version of Excalibur, which eventually became Nyx



Figure 9. Excalibur (left), Nyx (right)

The requests for alternative sex versions of frames come up fairly often in the community forums. Granting players the option of choosing to gender a frame male or female would certainly open the possibility for new hybrid configurations. One could imagine a male Saryn, who would adopt her poisoned flower theming even if not her high-heels. At the same time, however, male and female versions reinforce a conception of gender as simply one setting, a toggable option.

This reductive treatment of gender experience is evidenced by the history of the Ash warframe. According to an early developer's diary, Ash was conceived as a female-assigned frame. The developers eventually changed their minds and released Ash in its current, male-marked form. For this reason, the community sometimes refers to Ash as transgender. Of course, the design decision to switch Ash from female to male was not intended to speak to a trans experience or identity. In fact, gameplay for Ash remained unaltered in the transition from female to male versions. It instead reveals that gender in

Warframe is an aesthetic choice, one not intended to address to identity as it influences a player's lived social life.

Switching Ash to male had the secondary effect of upsetting the numerical balance of male and female assigned frames in the game at the time. The original set of frames included three female-assigned frames—Trinity, Ember, Mag—and five male-assigned frames—Excalibur, Rhino, Loki, Volt, and the sex-swapping Ash. Since Update 6, the release of new frames has alternated between male-assigned and female-assigned frames, seeking to return to equal representation. The current count, after the release of Atlas, is thirteen male-assigned and twelve female-assigned.

Gender also structures the release schedule of the prime warframes. DE releases a prime version of an existing frame, redesigned with gold flourishes and some improved statistics, every two months or so with a predictable and unwavering pattern of two male frames followed by two female frames: Excalibur (m), Frost (m), Mag (f), Ember (f), Rhino (m), Loki (m), Nyx (f), Nova (f), Volt (m), and Ash (m). Following the pattern, the community accurately predicted the release of the last two, male-assigned primes. At time of writing, DE has just announced the next prime, the female support-frame, Trinity. Here, too, binary gender organizes this posthuman environment to the point of rigid numerical balance.

With this in mind, the gender presentation of some of the more progressive warframe designs looks a little different. Is there anything about Mesa, the cowgirl Dirty Harry, that is meaningfully female? Was Zephyr, the bird frame, assigned female in order to meet a quota (see Figure 10)? Even if that were the case, to what degree does her female assignment participate meaningfully in a hybrid identity? Does Mag's moustache complicate gender or flatten it?



Figure 10. Promotional image for Zephyr

* * *

The way the gender binary continues to structure hybridity is exemplified in the recently released Equinox (see Figure 11). The warframe profile for video for Equinox describes her as a “deadly duality, divided into complimentary halves, gleaming the slip between day and night” (PlayWarframe, 2015). As such, Equinox can, with her first ability, switch, mid-mission, between a day aspect, which presents as male, and a night aspect, which presents as female. Each aspect has its own set of themed powers, thereby, granting Equinox seven abilities, split into three sets of binary skills.



Figure 11. Equinox, day aspect (left), combined form (middle), and night aspect (right)

Equinox is thus fundamentally hybrid, a warframe designed to swap genders to strategic advantage repeatedly throughout a mission. Despite this flexibility, Equinox operates within composed, binary gender performances. The theming of each aspect participates in traditional gender tropes; the male day aspect grants offensive abilities, while the female night aspect offers supportive abilities. Further, while in mission, Equinox must take on one of these gendered presentations and cannot remain in the combined form she takes on while on her ship, in a clan dojo, or public relay station. In other words, Equinox must transition out of the combined, hybrid form and resolve to one side of the binary to participate in a mission. Finally, DE_ Adam (2015), one of the game's developers, confirmed on the forums that Equinox is "in fact a she, but she also has a masculine form." By pegging this gender-swapping frame to a stable gender position, DE achieved, at the time, perfect gender balance with twelve male frames and, counting Equinox, twelve female frames.

Despite all that, despite all the ways a gender binary structures the frame's design, playing Equinox and playing her well means playing between. It requires modding her in such a way as to support both sets of abilities. It requires knowing, not only when to switch between aspects, but how to use one to set up the other. It is an intensely interactive experience, as one switches from one aspect to the other, casts an ability, then switches back to cast another. Responding to enemy movements as well as those of their teammates requires Equinox players to balance buffs, debuffs, disables, heals, and damage. Though Equinox's design forces her into one aspect at a time, the player's awareness and presence never fall solely to one side or the other. It hovers between, applying one aspect while considering when to apply the other, flowing across the battlefield and incorporating friend and foe.

Playing Equinox is the distillation of playing *Warframe* into a

single, hybrid character. Here, as elsewhere in the game, it falls to the player to find fluidity within the structure by playing with intention and creativity.

* * *

I began this inquiry by asking why Saryn wears high-heels. The simple answer is that they indicate that she is female. Without such gendered signifiers, all frames would default male. By presenting an arsenal of powersuits with declared gender assignments, DE tries to offer a diverse set of in-game avatars, despite the fact that these gender declarations seem wholly irrelevant within the game's narrative conceit and have no effect on gameplay. In effect, however, the assignment of the frames conflates sex with gender presentation, invoking both though it neither represents nor speaks to gendered experience or positionality. Gender is injected into and circulates within this fictional posthuman world as a set of free-floating signifiers. This might be the reason that, despite the supposedly post-gender framework, *Warframe* frequently falls back on such established, normative tropes, like high heels.

Shaw (2014) observes that gender representation in videogames often tells us more about a developer's market assumptions than about gender as a modality of life experience. Given their rigid commitment to numerical balance, their tendency to swap assignments without changing gameplay, their reliance on clichéd gender signifiers, it would be tempting to see DE's treatment of gender in *Warframe* as simply another case of Ms. Pacman or as reducing gender to an aesthetic or customization option. Yet, something more is going on here, for playing *Warframe* is itself an experience of gender within contemporary wired culture.

In the forum post "THIS WHOLE DISCUSSION ABOUT WARFRAME GENDERS AND THEIR IDENTITY...MY 2

CENTS,” Shehriazad (2015) suggests a way to understand why the warframes are sexed despite their nonhuman operators: “So I think that in the end... Warframes are our ‘residual self image’. They help the Tenno cope with their horrible situation of no longer being the human being they once were.” “Residual self-image” is a reference to *The Matrix* (1999); a phrase used to explain why Neo has clothes on and looks human when appearing in a computer simulation. Invoking it here, the original poster claims that gender and sexuality hold over as humans transition to their posthuman future. Whether this is accurate for *Warframe* lore or not, this formulation highlights what I find so interesting about gender and sexuality in *Warframe* and why playing with these amalgamations of gendered signifiers might have more to say about identity in today’s digital culture than it first appears.

Replying to Shehriazad’s post, Sziklamester remarks that he wishes that there were male and female versions of every frame because, “I like personalize myself with the male frames because I am also male and harder to personalize myself as girl because I am not a girl.” In the context of the game and its posthuman themes, this is a fascinating, even ironic, sentiment. The poster feels restricted by DE’s design choice, unable to express a continuous gender experience between online and offline contexts. From another perspective, we might say he still feels a residual self-image of unified maleness even as the digital culture in which he participates—by, for example, playing videogames like *Warframe*—imposes fragmentations and hybridity.

Perhaps this is the trade off, a strategic evacuation of gender in order to gain the fluidity within a residual binary. Channeling Fredric Jameson, Galloway (2005) observes that protocological flexibility sacrifices the history that hurts. Games offer us configurable and customizable traits that can get picked up and put down to advantage, but often only by detaching from “daily activity,” as Donna Haraway (1991) puts it, where identity is lived

(p. 180). Haraway urges aspiring cyborgs to “consider more seriously the partial, fluid, sometimes aspect of sex and sexual embodiment. Gender might not be global identity after all, even if it has profound historical breadth and depth.” As *Warframe* seems to suggest, however, the residual images of this profound history continue to structure even the horrible new hybrid configurations of our posthuman future.

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