

‘The Controller is Mightier Than the Pen!’ Narrative Space in Video Games

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Abstract

There is an uncomfortable tension in the discourse of video games these days, localized around the concept of ‘narrative.’ The popularity of story-based and cinematically inspired games such as *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*¹ and *Mass Effect 3*² suggests that narratives play an important role in the development and consumption of video games, and yet the use of narrative principles to study and define games is often criticized and even condemned. In *Inventing the Medium*,³ Janet H. Murray defines the digital medium in such a way that its narrative affordances are eclipsed. This re-definition reflects the dominant discourse in video game studies, which has sought to separate the video game as medium from more traditional narrative media.

In November 2012 this author presented research exploring how players perceived ‘narrative’ in games. The study sought to answer this question by applying qualitative discourse analysis to reviews of *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* submitted by players on Metacritic.com. Study results map relationships between ‘narrative,’ ‘interactivity,’ and ‘immersion,’ complexly interrelated concepts that define the video game as medium. This chapter will revisit findings and further explore the implications of the model for the ‘narrative space’ of video games proposed in that research, while at the same time mapping the current state of the field.

Key Words: narrative, video game, games, gamers, RPG, immersion, interactivity, Skyrim, medium.

1. Introduction

To play a game is to engage in activity directed toward bringing about a specific state of affairs, using only means permitted by specific rules, where the means permitted by the rules are more limited in scope than they would be in the absence of the rules, and where the sole reason for accepting such limitation is to make possible such activity. – Bernard Suits, “What is a Game?” (1967)

What is the video game’s ‘narrative’? Espen Aarseth describes this elusive concept as ‘post-narrative discourse,’ a level of structured, interactive storytelling

integrated into the act of play and divorced from traditional narratological models.⁴ Jesper Juul argues that games are essentially 'non-narrative,' given an inherent temporal conflict between narration and interactivity, and a combination of the undetermined state of story in-game and the active state of the player playing the game.⁵ Henry Jenkins suggests that the video game—'undertheorized hybrid between games and narratives'—are 'not-not-narratives' in the same way the duck-billed platypus is not-not-a-bird.⁶ While seasoned theorists, veterans of many skirmishes between the ludologists and narratologists, may wish nothing more than to move past these debates,⁷ the fact remains that the concept of narrative—troubled, contested, unavoidable—is central to the way we understand video games.

There is a corollary to the view that proposes games are 'non-narrative,'⁸ as well as the broader discourse in digital media studies that occlude or diminish narrative elements present in the digital medium.⁹ By focusing on defining a medium for digital production as a set of principles, rules or units that distinguish it from other models, we also atomize the experience of agents interacting and exploring the 'possibility space'¹⁰ instantiated by that set of principles: the user, or rather, the *player*. Other concepts are employed to represent the user/player and their relationship to the medium: 'interaction' and 'immersion.' This is perhaps because both interaction and immersion cannot take place without an agent; narrative, on the other hand, as it is traditionally understood, is primarily a *narrative statement*¹¹—that part of it which is authored and pre-exists within the medium. In other words, a novel can exist without a reader; but can a game exist without a player?

Bernard Suits began his 1967 essay 'What is a Game?' by describing the relationship between 'game,' 'play,' and 'player.'¹² Over time, Suits' conclusions,¹³ as well as those of Johan Huizinga¹⁴ and Roger Caillois,¹⁵ have laid a groundwork of principles for game studies. Based on this traditional preoccupation with the role of the player in gameplay, this chapter explores the state of the field of video game studies and the theoretical position in which 'narrative' currently finds itself within that field. In an effort to rescue this idea of a video game 'narrative,' I will then describe observations from the empirical study that inspired the current essay. The study findings are used to demonstrate that there exists a 'narrative space' in video games that is defined, co-authored, and experienced by the players, and which extends beyond the medium of the video game. This model for the narrative space of video games provides a new way for theorists to conceptualize storytelling in video games and transmedia.

2. What is a Video Game?

I introduce this paper with a conclusion, as Suits did in 'What is a Game?'¹⁶ My study is interested in understanding how players perceive the significance of narrative in video games, and their expression of how it relates to the many other

complex concepts present in games. My purpose is at once more specific and less ambitious than Suits' attempt to define gameplay, and yet it is far more complicated since it relies on a number of contested terms (including that of 'game') that demand definition: What is a 'video game'? What is a 'narrative'? Who and what are video game 'players' (as opposed to other media consumers)? These are only the most important questions that in turn depend on a shared understanding of difficult concepts like medium, interactivity, and immersion. Therefore, like Suits, I will start with an exercise in definition, establishing the known commonplace in order to explore the unplumbed depths of what can be known hidden beneath it.¹⁷

What is a 'video game'? From the word, we can immediately determine three things: it is both *visual* and *digital* (video), and it is a *game*. Let's start by unpacking the concept of 'video.' It is, fundamentally, a reference to medium: (1) It shares a relationship with the cinematic medium of film. (2) Similarly—and particularly in our post-Internet modern-day—'video' also shares a relationship with the digital, what is commonly referred to as 'multimedia,' 'new media,' or, with increasing authority, the 'digital medium.'¹⁸ There is some contention among video game scholars about the use of the term 'video' to refer to their object of study; David Buckingham, for instance, prefers the term 'computer game,' suggesting that it is more inclusive.¹⁹ Certainly, 'computer game' emphasizes the procedural nature of such games and orients them firmly as a subclass of the digital, while diminishing the specifically visual qualities they also possess. A number of critics have attempted to mark the distinction between video games and computer games,²⁰ but for the sake of the present exercise, let us presume that I mean both and that I am discussing all games played on a PC and/or console. Using Wittgenstein's notion of family resemblance,²¹ it is possible to note the following: The first relationship with film and television implies a set of shared characteristics with an established medium that follows a traditionally narrative form. The second relationship with the digital implies a set of shared characteristics with a new medium still in the process of establishing formal conventions that does not strictly adhere to the structures proposed by narrative discourse. Does this make it a hybrid of both, or something uniquely neither? As an object of study, can it be examined with the tools of narrative or media theories, or does it demand a brand-new framework to properly understand how it functions? These questions represent some of the debates central to video game studies.

'Game,' as a loaded concept, is even less easily unpacked, despite generating an entire field of scholarship. Suits defines the game as an activity possessing the following elements:

- (1) it is directed toward achieving a prelusory goal ('specific state of affairs');
- (2) it possesses the lusory means of achieving that goal;

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- (3) it has rules that apply to prelusory goals (constitutive rules) and lusory goals (rules of skill);
 - (4) it demands the player adopt a lusory attitude (the player must accept the limitations set by rules and means in order for the activity to be possible).²²

Suits uses the word 'lusory,' from the Latin *ludus*, to suggest the state of being engaged in a game. A prelusory goal is the state of affairs required to complete the game (e.g., getting a golf ball into a cup).²³ It is prelusory because it can be described independently of the means (e.g., using a golf club) and the constitutive rules (e.g., not permitted to kick the golf ball out of the rough) as conditions of winning the game. The goal of winning by accepting the rules and using the means supplied is, on the other hand, *lusory*. A lusory attitude is the player's acceptance of this second goal of winning, which indicates an engagement in the game as a system separate from real-world considerations and conditions, a world unto itself. The lusory attitude, in this sense, is akin to the literary concept of 'willing suspension of disbelief'; readers, viewers, or audience members must set aside what they perceive as 'real' and accept the world constructed by the narrative in order to fully enjoy it, much as the player must replace his understanding of moral, rational, and social conventions with the rules of the game in order to properly play (and succeed in) it.

It is difficult to distinguish between the concept of play and the concept of game, since the two are quite clearly entwined. Johan Huizinga defines play as a function of culture, one of the 'great archetypal activities' of human society,²⁴ which possesses the following characteristics:

- (1) it is a voluntary activity;
- (2) it is not 'ordinary' or 'real' life, but rather a 'stepping out of real life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own;'
- (3) it proceeds within its boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules, containing its own course and meaning;
- (4) it promotes the formation of social groupings ('play-communities').²⁵

Further to this, Huizinga states that the function of play has two basic manifestations:

- (1) as a contest for something (a prelusory goal, perhaps);
- (2) as a *representation* of something (metaphor as play).²⁶

The second function suggests that play can take place *without game*; game, on the other hand, must be played or cease to be meaningful. In comparing Suits and Huizinga, it is reasonable to suggest that the game is the vehicle, the ‘temporary sphere of activity’ that possesses its own boundaries, course and meaning, and that play is the lusory attitude required for the player to become absorbed within that sphere, in other words, to perform the activity of gameplay.

The distinct ‘sphere of activity’ of the game has been described variously as a ‘magic circle,’²⁷ a ‘second-order reality,’²⁸ and a ‘frame.’²⁹ Avoiding a much longer digression arguing the merits of this concept, —whatever we choose to call it—as a distinction it is important simply in communicating that a game—like the narrative discourse of a play, a film, or a novel—is a microcosm defined by its own set of boundaries in time and space, its own conventions, and its own procedures. That is not to say that a player’s engagement with the game is separate from real-world context or consequences; in describing the fourth characteristic of play, Huizinga emphasizes that the play-community ‘tends to become permanent even after the game is over,’ that the feeling of ‘mutually withdrawing from the rest of the world and rejecting usual norms retains its magic beyond the duration of the individual game.’³⁰ In the next section of this volume, Sarah Christina Ganzon and Veerle Van Steenhuyse each illustrate this point through their exploration of fan communities based around video games and novels, respectively.³¹ Together, they also demonstrate that ‘play’ is an activity as common to the reader as it is to the player. Similarly, in adopting Huizinga’s non-specific use of the term ‘magic circle’ in *Homo Ludens* to describe the microcosm of gameplay,³² Salen and Zimmerman acknowledge that a game may be ‘open’ or ‘closed’ to the real-world context within which it is played.³³ Their application of systems theory for defining the game is, at best, problematic,³⁴ but at least they note that the boundary between the ‘real’ world and the game world is *permeable* the moment the concept of play (and player) is introduced. It is the lusory attitude the player brings to the game that allows him to experience a sustained emotional or psychological impact that extends beyond his interaction with the game, much as a gripping novel might for a reader or a moving performance might for an audience member.

More contemporary definitions of ‘game’ have been attempted within the context of video game studies. Considering one of the more prominent of these in contrast to the higher-level definitions of Huizinga and Suits may be valuable in understanding where we stand vis-à-vis the video game. Jesper Juul provides the following characteristics of the game:

- (1) games are based on rules;
- (2) games have variable, quantifiable outcomes;
- (3) different values (positive or negative) are assigned to these outcomes;
- (4) the player invests effort to achieve the desired outcome;

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- (5) the player is emotionally 'attached' to the outcome;
 (6) games have negotiable consequences for real life.³⁵

The most noticeable difference is Juul's use of the word 'outcome' instead of Suits' use of the word 'goal.' (2), (3), and (4) suggest that not all outcomes are 'desired,' meaning not all might be goals, but rather are *consequences* of the player's actions. This does not dismiss the existence of the prelusory goal, but places it in the broader category of 'outcomes.' Secondly, the notion that outcomes are variable emphasizes the player's agency within the game; this builds upon Huizinga's definition of play as a free and 'voluntary activity,' but also implies an added dimension of possibility and randomness to the game space. Thirdly, Juul—like Suits and Huizinga—includes rules as an essential quality of games. Fourthly, (4) and (5) reference the player's engagement in the game, the 'effort' he expends to achieve the desired outcome/prelusory goal, and his emotional attachment to that outcome. This represents the lusory attitude of the player that Suits describes. For Juul, there seems to be some connection within this concept to elements of agency, interactivity and immersion. Finally, (6) recognizes once again the permeable nature of the boundary between the real and the lusory.

So what does that mean for the 'video game'? Others have attempted classifications of games, with varying degrees of success; it is arguable whether video games represent a formal subset of games, all games within a distinct, new medium, or, perhaps as Henry Jenkins suggests, a hybrid of games and narratives.³⁶ The question of medium is no small one, either. As I have indicated, video games represent a hybrid between the visual 'analog' form of film and the digital. In the latter case, it also implies an aggregation of existing media—a meta-media.³⁷ At the same time, the concept of play and the participatory element of the digital medium complicate any comparison with other, more traditional media. So what is a 'video game'? It is all of these things, and none of them. It is a hybrid medium that combines the digital and the traditionally cinematic, and it is also a game, twice-bounded by its rules and its form. It is both 'game' and 'video,' and at the same time neither. As Jenkins puts it, it is a duck-billed platypus: not-a-bird, and yet not-not-a-bird.³⁸

All of these concepts, which together serve as the foundation for scholarship on video games, are the basis for the study of *Skyrim* players undertaken later in this chapter. The definition of 'video game'—and, more importantly, the player and the narrative—will be revisited in the discussion of findings.

3. The State of the Field

The field of video game studies lies very much at the heart of a raging whirlpool. Competing theories about media, interactivity, and criticism swirl and eddy in a deafening torrent. This, to me, is a sign of two important things: (1) a healthy and growing discourse, requirement for any field of study to be relevant,

and (2) a fluid, constantly shifting definition of fundamental principles characteristic of young interdisciplinary fields—the kind we resist labeling as ‘disciplines’ in and of themselves, and yet that seem to fall between the cracks of established discourses—fields that are still developing a grounding framework. Video game studies, despite at least twenty years of vigorous scholarly existence, and roughly forty years of actual source material (i.e., the games themselves) to draw upon, remain very much in their infancy. This is due in no small part to the state of the medium itself, which is still developing conventions for expression. To borrow a term from Janet Murray in a similar argument about the state of the digital medium, this is the ‘incunabular’ period of video games.³⁹ In the fifty years following the invention of the printing press, books were called *incunabula*, ‘swaddling clothes’; it took fifty years of experimentation for the print medium to evolve the conventions that we are familiar with today—before it had reached maturity. Video games are still in their infancy, and so it is not surprising that, as a field of study, it remains hotly contested and fiercely defended.

In the early part of the twenty-first century, the field was defined by a debate between ludologists and so-called narratologists. The first group, to their great credit, sought to carve out a theoretical domain unique to the field of video game studies, loosely relying on the principles of game theory established by Johan Huizinga and Roger Caillois, among others.⁴⁰ The idea was that existing theoretical models—such as, for instance, narrative theory—could not appropriately do justice to the study of such a complex hybrid as video games, and that new, more robust theoretical models needed to be developed for that purpose. Meanwhile, other scholars, emerging particularly from the area of literary criticism, had begun to look at video games as a subclass of the new digital narrative, or hypertext—distinct forms of the hypertext and the cybertext that told—and constructed—stories far more interactively than any previous narrative form.⁴¹ These scholars made use of postmodern narrative theories in an effort to understand how the elements of narrative discourse were mediated in video games. The ludologists perceived these ‘narratologists’ as, for lack of a better term, invaders; a fundamental disagreement about the nature of video games ensued. At the core of it lies the question: what *are* video games? Are they narratives? Or are they games?

It is a false distinction to make. Video games are interactive narratives—they can tell stories, and theoretically conform to the basic requirements of the narrative as described by Gérard Genette in his *Narrative Discourse*.⁴² But they are also, evidently, games, and can be classified with a minimum of jiggering within the schemes suggested by Caillois in his *Classification of Games*,⁴³ or in the definitions we have just seen from Huizinga, Suits, and Juul. Ipso facto, video games are both narratives and games. Neither group outright denies these characteristics of the medium, but historically they have disagreed on a matter of degree: what is it *most* like, a narrative or a game? And, based on such arbitration, what is the most effective way to study video games as a totality? Ludologists like

Jesper Juul have made compelling arguments for video games as ‘non-narrative’ by virtue of possessing the defining interactive qualities of games—what Huizinga refers to as ‘play’ and Suits as ‘lusory.’⁴⁴ Ian Bogost puts forward an approach to video game criticism with *Unit Operations*,⁴⁵ which de-emphasizes the narrative frame as a basis for criticism in favour of a procedural frame. On the other hand, with what seems a perfectly reasonable argument, narratologists (so-called) contend that, so long as the video game tells a story, it can be studied as a narrative. Janet Murray, in her initial foray to uncover a comprehensive definition of the digital medium, never questioned the integral operation of narrative in the interactive possibility space of the digital: narrative was, in fact, the hero of her book, as can be determined simply by reading its title on the spine—*Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*.⁴⁶ In her more recent exploration, *Inventing the Medium*, written from the more targeted perspective of interaction design, the word ‘narrative’ is conspicuously absent; and yet, in putting forth a vocabulary unique to the study of the digital, other terms such as ‘inscription,’ ‘transmission,’ and ‘representation,’ as well as ‘genre’ and ‘immersion’ seem to rescue the concept by breaking it down to its structural components. Still, the absence of the word is both telling of the current low opinion of ‘narrative’ within the scholarly discourses of video games and the digital medium and lamentable given its significance as a key concept. Henry Jenkins, a media scholar who, like Murray, has been labelled as a narratologist, was taken to task by Ian Bogost in a review of his book, *Convergence Culture*,⁴⁷ for referring to ‘narrative’ and ‘storytelling’ as principle components of cultural expression.⁴⁸ According to Bogost, Jenkins is guilty of privileging narrative expression, and ‘occluding representational gestures based on logics and behaviors.’⁴⁹ Jenkins response to this was insightful. He refers to a previous defense of narrative leveled at Markku Eskelinen, in which he compared video games to gardens as vehicles for storytelling: gardens can evoke stories, as settings for stories and as vignettes or recreations—a form of ‘retelling,’ what Genette refers to as the ‘narrating event’⁵⁰—of story spaces.⁵¹ In this sense they operate ‘as part of a larger narrative economy.’⁵² Jenkins’ position is that narrative as it is understood today is not just storytelling but ‘world-building,’⁵³ its meaning has been exploded beyond the formal and structural principles proposed by the original narratologists.⁵⁴ But Jenkins, either in a fit of collegiality or simply to avoid revisiting old arguments, is willing to compromise with Bogost and admit that his use of ‘transmedia storytelling’ should more accurately be called ‘transmedia authorship’ or ‘transmedia entertainment.’⁵⁵ While it seems like this disarms the problem of narrative, it opens the door to the concept in a different way; authorship *implies* narrative. What do we make, for instance, of the transmedial ‘narrative gaps’ described by Phil Fitzsimmons and Edie Lanphar in the first chapter of this volume, that the reader, viewer or player must traverse in order to make sense of their experience?⁵⁶ What do we make of fan fiction, often relying not only on the

narrative economy of a source, but of cross-media adaptations (including existing fan fiction and other unauthorized productions) as well?⁵⁷ The question of authorship in the world of the transmedia narrative is a common thread revisited throughout this volume.

In a review of the last ten years of video game scholarship, it seems like the dust has settled over the debate about narrative, and the clear victors are the ludologists. Those who fought in favour of narrative have quietly ceded their claim to the game theorists. And yet, the argument remains frustratingly unresolved. What are stories in video games, if not narrative?

4. Transmedia Narrative

Before exploring precisely how the digital medium alters the way we understand ‘narrative’ and how narratives might emerge within the context of video games, it would be valuable to consider precisely what is meant by ‘narrative.’ A good place to start is with the principles of narrative discourse.

G rard Genette defines narrative as a trinity composed of:

- (1) the narrative statement, or discourse;
- (2) the story, as the succession of events;
- (3) the narrating event.⁵⁸

The narrative statement represents the core element of narrative; it is the formal ‘discourse that undertakes to tell of an event or series of events.’ In other words, it is the book, or the play, or the film. It represents medium. The story is the order of events that are the subjects of this discourse, the ‘totality of actions and situations taken in themselves, without regard to the medium...’⁵⁹ The narrating event is the *now* in which the discourse is read, heard or viewed, and—perhaps—played. The interrelation of these three elements is what shapes the formal structure and temporality of any given narrative. There is nothing specifically in Genette that precludes the application of this basic construction to alternative narrative forms—including the video game.

The principal difference between a video game and a novel is not, as one might expect, in the narrative statement, nor even in the order of events—which will include situations that are not ‘played’—just as they are not ‘read’—chronologically; situations implied in cutscenes, backstory, analepses and prolepses. The difference between traditional narrative forms and video games is in the narrating event, which concerns the reader’s (or player’s) engagement with the narrative. The participatory nature of games allow the narrating event, the story, and the discourse to converge at the point of engagement, when story events are not told to so much as authored by the player. So, while for Genette and his analysis of Proust the narrating event is less emphasized than either the discourse

or even the story, it is much more significant to the structure of the video game narrative.

At this point, it is worth recalling Jenkins' broader definition of 'narrative' and how he perceives its role in video games (and 'transmedia systems') as taking part in a 'larger narrative economy.'⁶⁰ Video game narrative, thus, can be defined in two ways: specifically, as a system or structure, in the way that Genette describes it, but with a stronger emphasis on the narrating event and generally as any cultural production that evokes stories through the creation of environments or scenarios that directly or indirectly enact a retelling through one's interactions with them.

5. Medium and Criticism

Most theorists do not hesitate to call video games a medium, without qualifying precisely what that signifies. Given the importance of the concept of 'medium' to the fundamental question of what a video game is, it seems only fair to pause a moment in order to deconstruct what it means. At the risk of cliché, I turn to the godfather of media studies and hazard a starting point with his immortal phrase: 'The medium is the message.'⁶¹ What this means is that, beyond the material content existing at the outset, when conveyed through technology—be it a book, a television, or a computer screen—communication is transformed in 'scale or pace or pattern.'⁶² This may have unintended consequences for how we understand the message; over time, use of a particular medium can change how we communicate as a society or a culture. McLuhan defines 'medium' as prosthetic, an 'extension of ourselves.'⁶³ Like a hammer extends the arm, it increases the range of what we can do beyond our physical limitations. In this sense, McLuhan's 'medium' is very broad: it includes everything that extends our abilities and senses.

Janet Murray has made it her mission to convince us that the popular perception that the digital is a mere aggregation of media is inaccurate, and that it represents a medium unto itself.⁶⁴ While we can see, based on McLuhan's broad definition, how the digital can be both a single medium and a collection of media (a mixture of visual, textual, auditory, and participatory technologies), Murray uses the theory of affordances to make her point. She argues that the digital possesses four affordances that, in combination, make it unique. These are:

- (1) *Procedural*: the computer's ability to represent and execute conditional behaviours;
- (2) *Participatory*: we are able to induce behaviours due to the computer's ability to process our input;
- (3) *Encyclopedic*: the computer's ability to contain and transmit information;
- (4) *Spatial*: the computer creates virtual spaces that we can navigate.⁶⁵

Murray further contextualizes these affordances by categorizing them. An environment that is both procedural and participatory, she writes, is *interactive*.⁶⁶ Meanwhile, one that is both spatial and encyclopedic is *immersive*.⁶⁷ She further adds that the navigation of a virtual space, in the example of a hypertext is ‘a dramatic enactment of the plot.’⁶⁸ This is essentially what playing a video game is as well.

Ian Bogost developed his ‘unit analysis’ primarily as a way of performing criticism of video games, but also as method for analysis that functions for both ‘legacy’ and new media, which sets aside traditional notions regarding narrative structure and authorship by marrying principles of literary theory with computational concepts.⁶⁹ Bogost demonstrates two approaches to criticism by providing an example with the film *The Terminal*.⁷⁰ He sets up a traditional approach as an example of ‘systems operations,’ in which the narrative structure is foregrounded. Opposite this approach is the example of his own ‘unit analysis’ where he interprets the ‘networks of discrete readings’⁷¹ in the film:

But when the viewer stops regarding the film as a story about a man’s quest, *The Terminal* becomes a much more subtle meditation on the unit operations for various kinds of uncorroborated waiting.⁷²

The question becomes, how do we understand narrative from a unit operations approach to criticism? For Bogost, the unique nature of the digital medium makes it impossible to perform a ‘systems operations’-style, traditional criticism on video games. He cites Murray’s four affordances, in fact, with a focus on the procedural affordance to help support this argument.⁷³ But when you deconstruct the game in this way, what happens to the narrative? Jesper Juul would say that this is an example of how video games are, in fact, non-narrative, while emphasizing, on the other hand, that ‘game sessions’—the limited periods in which the player engages with the game—have the potential to create narratives.⁷⁴ Game sessions do align with Bogost’s units, so perhaps that is one way to interpret stories in games; it is, however, essential to emphasize the connection between units. Using Bogost’s own words, these discrete readings (or game sessions) in which the story takes place are linked together in networks. And these networks, when interpreted in context with one another, can provide insight on the common threads that bind them.

6. A Study of *Skyrim* Players

This study seeks to understand how players perceive the significance of *narrative* in videogames, and their expression of how it relates to theoretical elements of gameplay, such as ‘interaction’ and ‘immersion.’ Using the Grounded Theory approach of qualitative coding, as described by Strauss and Corbin,⁷⁵ I sought to answer the problem of narrative in video games by examining user

reviews submitted on Metacritic.com. These reviews are written by players, rather than by game journalists; short of conducting focus groups with players, this was the most appropriate way to obtain data relevant to this research. Discourse analysis, as opposed to the statistical approaches of textual analysis, is a widely accepted qualitative approach in the social sciences for conceptual ordering and theorizing through the careful categorization of concepts and themes.⁷⁶ Such an approach is appropriate for mapping the relationships between concepts such as 'narrative,' 'interactivity,' and 'immersion,' which are so complexly interrelated in the video game medium. The cases sampled for this analysis include players' reviews of Bethesda Studios' *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*—winner of the Video Game Awards' 2011 Game of the Year.⁷⁷ As an open-world role-playing game (RPG), *Skyrim* has evident narrative elements, while also possessing distinctly 'non-narrative' or 'post-narrative' elements.⁷⁸ Understanding the interplay of these different elements makes it possible to theorize the nature of narrative in video games and how it emerges from that particular medium.

Fifty (N=50) reviews, from a total number of 240 reviews for *Skyrim* on the Xbox 360 console,⁷⁹ served as the sample to code for this project. In the following section usernames have been replaced with pseudonyms to enhance readability.

Coding began by identifying key concepts. After the first twelve reviews were coded, the codes were evaluated, broken down, and/or expanded to form categories and sub-categories. The codebook breaks down into five broad categories: (1) Interactivity (*with sub-categories: 'conceptual' and 'agent actions'*); (2) Design Elements; (3) Narrative Elements; (4) Game World; (5) Value Judgement.

In addition to these, two categories were included to gather codes that provide further context for analysis: (6) Meta (references to elements outside the frame of the game itself, e.g., genre references to game as an RPG or as epic fantasy, franchise references to 'Bethesda' or to other *Elder Scrolls* games), and; (7) Miscellaneous (uncategorized codes such as references to 'hours of play,' influence on 'real-life').

7. Findings: What Gamers Value

The players' value judgment of the game factored heavily in evaluations of it as a product. It is perhaps not surprising that 24/50 scored the game 10/10, or that only 11/50 scored the game less than 6/10 (six of these scored the game 0/10), considering *Skyrim* was voted Video Game Awards 'Game of the Year.' What is surprising is how reviewers define what represents a 'great' or 'perfect' game, as opposed to a 'disappointment' or a 'waste of time,' and what elements of gameplay they rely on to do so.

Based on reviews that did not assign the game a perfect score, major grievances with the game are:

- (1) bugs and lag on the gaming platform;

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- (2) interface design;
 - (3) recycled content and environments;
 - (4) not challenging enough;
 - (5) removal/adaptation of classic RPG conventions.

In an evaluation of a gameplay experience, it is important to understand how these concerns map to the concepts depicted in this study's categorization. The first three grievances are clearly design issues attributable either to a lack of innovation on the part of the designer or limitations of the technology. Some negative reviews focused on these technical limitations as principal criteria for evaluating the game; for example Alex wrote: 'Fire the guy who designed the interface. Just. Fire. Him. It's the worst interface I've ever seen... Apart from that, [it] is the same game we already knew from *Oblivion*.⁸⁰ Lots of bugs, pleasant graphics (but you can do better IF you don't do a straight from console porting) et cetera. If you liked *Oblivion* you will like this.' Alex's greatest grievance is that the interface is not well-designed for play on a PC using keyboard and mouse. Menus and inventory are difficult to navigate without the gamepad/controller of a console system.

The third grievance listed above is notable because the recycling of environments, such as dungeons, is a common approach in game development for managing the overall size of the game world in a computer role-playing game, or CRPG. It allows more events to take place, and more options for the player, while using up less memory. The problem with this approach is that, as graphics and game engines have become more sophisticated, players have become less blind to such reuse of game content. 'The dungeons are very well done and much less cookie cutter than other Elder Scrolls game,' writes Val, 'but after a while they seem to become all the same again. The same few groups of enemies too.' Sean notes: 'Copy and paste dungeons. Lack of variety. [...] Environments are repetitive.' Billy emphasises textures 'look recycled from *Oblivion*. ...others look from Playstation.'

This suggests that certain players are not merely interested in games for the pleasure of striving for and achieving desired outcomes,⁸¹ but also in engaging with them on an aesthetic level. The game world itself, and its environments, should be unique and rich in variety. The game environment as beautiful/ugly, as something that can be appreciated on its own merits as 'art,' is something that comes up frequently in reviews, both positive and negative. The players' sensitivity to the repetition of environments and of game scenarios/events/characters is also a sign of their desire for a game world that *feels* real and alive. The more real a game world seems, reviews suggested, the easier it is to immerse oneself in your character's unfurling narrative. The repetition of an environment, the sudden realization when entering a room in a dungeon on one side of the world that appears identical to another room on the other side of the world is enough to break immersion, and thus break engagement in the game.

The fourth and fifth grievances are based on the expectations of players vis-à-vis a game that exists within a particular genre discourse. In this case, *Skyrim* belongs to two important categories: that of the CRPG and of the 'open world.' According to Matt Barton, author of *Dungeons & Desktops*, the one common factor that defines all CRPGs is the combination of a complex statistical system and the built-in randomness of the die roll that determines how a character fares in combat.⁸² Barton goes on to indicate that this defining characteristic is manifested in CRPGs as a 'formalized, numerical system of levels based on experience points,' which distinguishes them from adventure games.⁸³ As a result, Barton suggests that 'the adventure gamer prioritizes deductive and qualitative thinking, whereas the CRPG fan values more inductive and quantitative reasoning.'⁸⁴ While the argument has been made that modern quest games no longer fit the mold of these categorizations as RPGs or adventure games,⁸⁵ the comments of certain reviewers do seem to support Barton's opinion. For example, Pat wrote: 'Stats are removed, turning it into an action game instead of a true RPG. Classes are removed. Guess they don't want console gamers having to THINK about what past their characters have.' Besides the interesting notion that Pat considers reflecting on the player character's backstory part of the player's gaming experience, this confirms Barton's claims about the CRPG genre, while also providing some insight into the player's expectations and how the design of *Skyrim* may conflict with them. Unlike tabletop or classic role-playing games like *Dungeons & Dragons*—which tend to have six or more—*Skyrim* limits character attributes to three basic abilities: strength (which governs the character's health meter), stamina (recovery time between physical exertions, such as swinging an axe or sprinting) and magicka (spell-casting capability). Also unlike most RPGs, *Skyrim* has done away with any kind of class system, giving the player the option of focusing on whatever skills they wish for their character. This can lead to some interesting and unlikely results, such as a fighter adept at stealth and lockpicking, or a mage who is also a master swordsman. Other reviewers, like Avery, characterised this change positively: 'There is also a clever levelling system whereby you level up after increasing any number of skills X number of times, which allows you to be any type of class you wish, and allows you to change class without having to start a new game, a generous plus in the games favour.'

Skyrim as an 'open world' game signifies that it allows the player the freedom to explore the world as they wish, without having their actions proscribed by the restrictions of a single desired outcome. Open world games pose an interesting quandary for traditional definitions of gameplay;⁸⁶ the goal of an open world game, from the outset, is simply to explore and experience the game world—in other words, total immersion in a realistic simulation. Or, as Jan describes it: 'The game has so many different story lines that I often find myself starting the game with no goal in mind initially, then before I know it, diving into some unexpected and

wonderful bit of the game only to resurface totally astounded from what I've just discovered.'

Additional goals present themselves as the game progresses, beginning with a narrative that establishes the player character's initial state as a 'stranger in a strange land;' from that point on goals emerge in the form of quests that may or may not reveal something about the overarching narrative that frames the entire game, but sometimes a goal might manifest simply in a player's desire to explore a particular environment on their own terms. Open world games are also the kind of games that some players take pleasure in 'breaking.' Some players seek to achieve a particular outcome by means provided in the open world environment, while dismissing the most evident means—or, as Espen Aarseth describes it, 'playing against the plot.'⁸⁷ Open world games invite this kind of improvisation, and do indeed challenge the idea of narrative by giving the player the opportunity to escape the traditional narrative frame.

Skyrim mediates these challenges by limiting the dialogue options with NPCs, having a series of parallel quest-lines that guide the player through world-altering events toward the game's conclusion, and making dungeons less challenging than they might be in smaller, more proscribed games. Billy and Pat both resented this as a form of 'hand-holding': 'This dumbed down crap is going to be game of the year?' (Billy). 'A game for babies who can't handle challenge or difficulty: It seems game [companies] today are terrified of making their games a challenge. They simply want to create [visually] immersive exploration with NO THREAT OR CHALLENGE to the player whatsoever' (Pat). What is interesting in comments like those of Billy and Pat is how they perceive immersion and exploration in *opposition* to difficulty or challenge. It is particularly the developer's desire to advance the overarching story that restricts the player's exploration of the game world by conspiring in the act of 'hand-holding.' Pat wants the game to be at once more restrictive thereby presenting a greater challenge, but without the guiding hand that enforces those boundaries.

Pat's example, however, does bring to light a fascinating dynamic between the narrative statement of a game and the concept of 'immersion' through open world exploration; it seems these two concepts are mutually exclusive, confirming Juul's claim that the medium is non-narrative.⁸⁸ And yet, both structured storytelling in the form of 'narrative statement'⁸⁹ and immersion in gameplay interaction⁹⁰ have the power to generate a narrative experience for the player.⁹¹ Indeed, it is worth noting that the majority of reviewers echoed Sam's sentiment that the degree of challenge in the game was more than sufficient, particularly when combined with the level of detail devoted to establishing story and setting: 'There are the occasional quests which come with the feel of 'awesomeness' bundled in and the development of seemingly simple quests into epic mission ... [Meanwhile] the main story itself is quite well put together with a feeling of urgency while at the same time being able to be completed whenever.' For players

like Sam the narrative statement, in a more traditional sense as a reader might experience story from a novel, is important, and plays a significant role in maintaining his lusory attitude with that 'feeling of urgency;' for others, like Val, the experience becomes one that is more akin to authorship: 'An Elder Scrolls game should be about spending hundreds and hundreds of hours building your character and mythos and immersing yourself.' This is, perhaps, the post-narrative discourse Aarseth perceives⁹² and what inspires the 'grassroots convergence' of modding and fan-fiction Jenkins has in mind when he theorizes 'transmedia storytelling';⁹³ where the game becomes a medium—a 'possibility space'⁹⁴—for *production* rather than merely a container for a pre-existing story, where the player generates his or her own narrative experience. Val's statement represents a commonly held opinion among the studied reviews, which assumes that player authorship is an essential function of games like *Skyrim*. This is compelling evidence that the interactive narrative is alive and well in the form of video games.

8. Discussion: The Narrative Space of Video Games

In *Inventing the Medium*, Janet Murray argues that the digital medium has four defining affordances: procedural, participatory, encyclopedic and spatial.⁹⁵ These are arranged in a matrix (or 'affordance grid'),⁹⁶ upon which can be mapped any variety of digital artifacts: web search engines, social networking websites, blogs, databases, recommender systems and, indeed, video games.⁹⁷ The idea behind Murray's theory is that any digital tool or technology can be understood by its relationship to each affordance (each represented as a quadrant).⁹⁸ As mentioned earlier, Murray adds the following conditions:

- An environment that is both procedural and participatory is *interactive*.
- An environment that is both spatial and encyclopedic is *immersive*.⁹⁹

While this is certainly useful in understanding how the interactivity and immersion of a game might relate to one another, or to compare the interactivity and immersion of different games, it still does not help us to determine the specific role of the narrative. If anything, it only helps to make that aspect of the game invisible—an occlusion that some might argue is evidence that video games are essentially non-narrative.

These reviews of *Skyrim* at once challenge and reinforce the idea of narrative in games. Narrative elements such as 'plot,' 'characters,' 'quests,' and 'dialogue' were coded alongside references to 'game world' and 'interactivity.' In reviewing the coding, these last two elements, which include abstract concepts such as 'immersion,' 'realism,' 'repetition,' and 'challenge' as well as the concrete actions in which the player exerts his or her agency such as 'fighting,' 'levelling up,' and

‘looting,’ are most definitely foregrounded. What is interesting to note, however, is how interwoven those actions and concepts are to what, according to Juul, cannot coexist with interactivity.¹⁰⁰ Indeed, it is quite clear from the coding that the *narrating event*¹⁰¹ is evident in how players characterise their interactions with the game. Whether or not they are in fact *creating* their own narrative in each game session, players are certainly engaging in a storytelling activity when they play. This is also true with the players’ interpretations of the game world. The concepts of ‘scope’ and ‘atmosphere’—which directly relate to Murray’s encyclopedic and spatial affordances of the digital medium¹⁰²—overlap with the coding of narrative elements. But, besides demonstrating how complexly interrelated all of these concepts are in the video game, have we actually managed to locate the narrative?

It is particularly Murray’s characterisation of ‘immersive’ and ‘interactive’ environments that is relevant to understanding the role of narrative, as perceived by the player. According to Murray, interaction and immersion as represented by the four affordances of the digital characterise an ideal in interaction design. She indicates that mapping artifacts on the affordance grid permit designers to improve a particular tool or technology by identifying the affordance(s) it does not fully take advantage of, reminding designers to ‘contextualise design within the possibilities of the whole medium.’¹⁰³ It should be evident by now that video games as a ‘medium’ share these affordances, being digital themselves. They possess conditional, programmed behaviours and are therefore procedural; these behaviours can be executed through the player’s choices, making them participatory; games can contain and transmit information, which can be meaningfully interpreted and affected by the player, proving they are encyclopedic; and games can produce a virtual space which the player can experience and explore, making them spatial. But the examples Murray provides of artifacts mapped onto the grid prove that environments are never purely ‘interactive’ or ‘immersive;’ this fact is only made more evident when applied to video games. The four affordances must be integrated the moment we consider the user as agent, since they rely on each other in order to function; a player exploring a virtual space in-game is inputting information, which in turn is inducing specific behaviours that transmit information (visual, auditory, textual, haptic) back to the player. In other words, the video game environment is both immersive and interactive, as interaction and immersion naturally feed into each other when using the medium. But what is most fascinating when studying Murray’s model is when we move past principles of design to examine the user’s experience; what happens when immersion and interaction collide? What does the player do with all of the information they receive? How do they interpret it, make meaning from it? What does it evoke for them?

I would suggest that the middle-space between interaction and immersion—where the procedural meets the encyclopedic and the participatory meets the spatial—is where narrative resides. Key functions of both the author and reader can

be found within this space; Murray describes these functions as 'dramatic enactment of plot' and 'navigation of space,'¹⁰⁴ but it is also possible to glimpse related concepts within this space, such as Ian Bogost's 'unit operations'¹⁰⁵ and the constructivist notion of 'interpretive framework' that informs both the methodological and theoretical underpinnings of this study. Based on the findings of the user study, I propose my own model for the narrative space of video games (Figure 1).

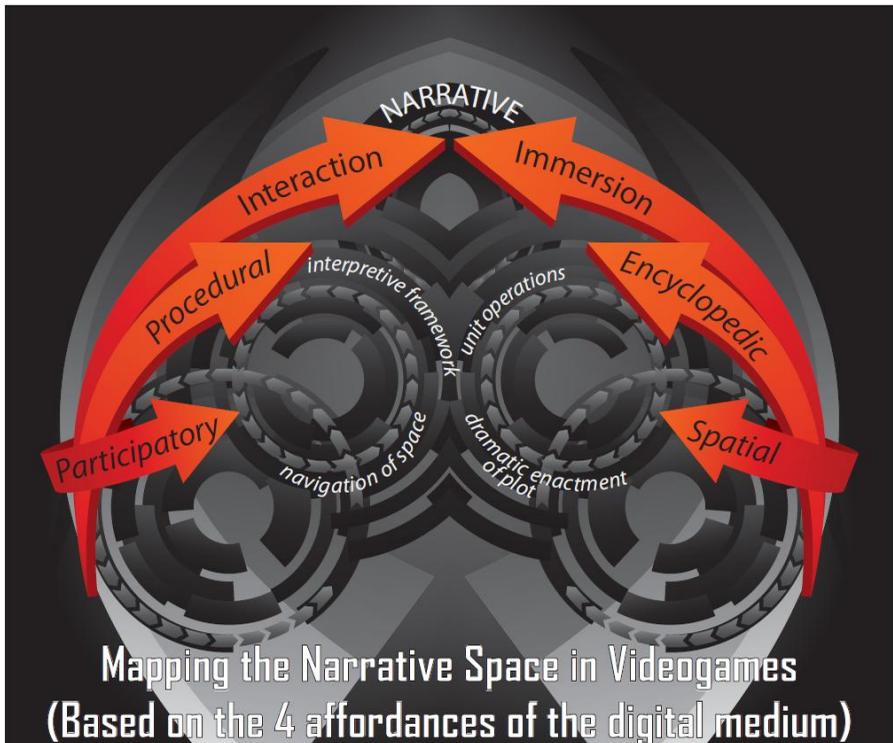


Figure 1. A model for the narrative space in video games, demonstrating the relationship between interaction, immersion and narrative.

In analyzing the comments of *Skyrim* players on Metacritic.com, it quickly becomes apparent that narrative is central to their playing of the game. The examples of Jan, Sam and Val demonstrate how the medium of the video game not only affords the experience and co-construction of narrative, but that these forms of readership and authorship, in fact, become actual *outcomes*—or, in some cases,

conscious, prelusory goals—of play. The players not only anticipate that the game will ‘tell’ them a story, but that they will get to create their *own* story. The experience of this self-tailored story, rather than simply ‘winning’ (a lusory goal), is the ‘specific state of affairs’ these players hope to bring about.¹⁰⁶ The degree to which *Skyrim* affords the achievement of that ‘state of affairs’ is how these players evaluate it as a video game. And, in exchange, all the players have to do is adopt the rules and limitations that define the game world.

9. Conclusions

“The lore behind this game is so deep... it feels like a real world.” – Wes, *Skyrim* player/reviewer

Video games have transformed how we think of games. Consider the conclusion Suits makes about games, included as the epigraph to this chapter. You will realize that, when discussing a game like *Skyrim*, an open world role-playing game designed to simulate reality—or at least, a realistic fantasy universe—it becomes difficult to think of the means provided within its ‘magic circle’ as ‘limitations.’ What is fascinating about such games is how they render the illusion that there are no ‘limitations.’ Rather, the ‘rules’ of the game imbue the player with superhuman powers, permit the player to author the fates of people within its simulated universe. This, of course, is not true of all video games, but provides evidence to the existence of ‘narrative’ as an affordance of the medium in the liminal space between interaction and immersion. Environments that are both interactive and immersive are also narrative.

According to Bernard Suits, a game is not played so long as the player does not adopt a *lusory attitude*.¹⁰⁷ Certainly there’s room for debate about what such an attitude represents, and whether or not it bears similarities to how a reader or an audience might engage in the story they are told. But what is evident in a study of video games, specifically, is that the concept of *narrative* is deeply tied to the player’s engagement in the game. It is not static, as one would expect in a novel or a film. There are components of it—*units*, to borrow Bogost’s term—that remain the same from one player’s experience to the next—but overall the narrative is unique to each player and to each play. In this way, the concept of ‘narrative’ is transformed by the affordances of the medium in which it is shared, in what Genette describes as the ‘narrating event.’¹⁰⁸ In order for us to locate the narrative in the video game, we must broaden our definition of the word. We need not make it so broad as Jenkins and nod to any object or space that *evokes* a story,¹⁰⁹ but we must allow for the ways in which the procedural and the participatory, the encyclopedic and the spatial can alter the way narrative manifests. Indeed, just like the game itself, narrative can only be experienced so long as the player, viewer, or reader accepts the laws of the universe it imposes.

It is worth noting that this is before even considering the development of play-communities around video games, which Sarah Christina Ganzon will explore later in this volume;¹⁰ such play-communities or fandoms throw into question the entire notion of authorship, particularly when it comes to games.

Consider finally that games as richly developed and meticulously produced as *Skyrim* have only been made possible thanks to the technological advances of the last decade. The video game, and more broadly, the digital, is a medium in its infancy. Models such as mine and Murray's identify the affordances that define the present state of the medium, but the future of that state remains largely undetermined. Game theorists and digital scholars both should be asking: what comes next? What are the limitations of the medium today—and how do we break them?

Notes

¹ *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Softworks, 2011), Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, PC.

² BioWare. *Mass Effect 3* (Electronic Arts, 2012), Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, PC.

³ Janet H. Murray, *Inventing the Medium: Principles of Interaction Design as Cultural Practice* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012).

⁴ Espen Aarseth, 'Beyond the Frontier: Quest Games as Post-Narrative Discourse,' *Narrative Across Media: The Languages of Storytelling* (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 361-376.

⁵ Jesper Juul. 'Games telling stories? A brief note on games and narratives,' *Game Studies* 1.1 (2001): <http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/juul-gts/>

⁶ Henry Jenkins, 'Henry Jenkins Responds in Turn,' *Electronic Book Review* (9 Jan 2004): <http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/firstperson/well-syuzheded>

⁷ Henry Jenkins. 'Response to Bogost (Part Two).' *Confessions of an Aca-Fan* (blog), August 14, 2006, http://henryjenkins.org/2006/08/response_to_bogost_part_two.html.

⁸ Juul, 'Games telling stories?'

⁹ Murray, *Inventing the Medium*, 51-85; Lev Manovich. *The Language of New Media*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 227-228.

¹⁰ Ian Bogost, 'The Rhetoric of Video Games,' *The Ecology of Games: Connecting Youth, Games, and Learning*, ed. Katie Salen (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008), 120.

¹¹ Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, Trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 25.

¹² Bernard Suits 'What is a Game?' *Philosophy of Science* 34, no. 2 (1967):148-156.

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- ¹³ Suits, 'What is a Game?' See also Bernard Suits, *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978).
- ¹⁴ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A study of the play element in culture* (Boston: Breacon Press, 1955).
- ¹⁵ Roger Caillois, *Man, Play, Games*, trans. Meyer Barash. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001). Originally published: New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1961.
- ¹⁶ Suits, 'What is a Game?' 148.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ Murray, *Inventing the Medium*.
- ¹⁹ David Buckingham, 'Studying Computer Games,' *Computer Games: Text, Narrative and Play*, eds. Diane Carr, David Buckingham, Andrew Burn and Gareth Schott (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2006), 4-5.
- ²⁰ Keith Feinstein, 'Towards a Definition of Videogames,' *Electronic Conservancy* (1999): <http://www.videotopia.com/errata1.htm>; Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron. 'Introduction,' *The Video Game Theory Reader* (London: Routledge, 2003), 1-24.
- ²¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 31-34.
- ²² Suits, 'What is a Game?'; Suits, *Grasshopper*, 34-41.
- ²³ Suits, 'What is a Game?'
- ²⁴ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A study of the play element in culture* (Boston: Breacon Press, 1955), 23.
- ²⁵ Ibid., 26-32.
- ²⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁷ Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2003), 95.
- ²⁸ Caillois, *Man, Play, Games*, 8.
- ²⁹ Michael J. Apter. 'A structural phenomenology of play: A reversal theory approach,' *Adult Play*, Eds. M. J. Apter & J. H. Kerr (Amsterdam: Swets & Beitlinger, 1991), 13-30.
- ³⁰ Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 31.
- ³¹ Veerle Van Steenhuyse. 'Oh, the Angst! Emotional Immersion in Jane Austen Fan Fiction,' in this volume. Sarah Christina Ganzon, 'Control, Destroy, Merge, Refuse, Retake: Players, the Author Function and the Mass Effect Ending Controversy,' in this volume. For further discussion of video game fan communities and fan fiction, see Shawn Edrei, 'For We Are Many': Decentralised Authorship and the Reader-Creator Binary in Internet-based Fan Fiction' (paper presented at the *1st Global Conference: Immersive Worlds and Transmedia*

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- Narratives*, Salzburg, Austria, 15-17 November 2012), <http://www.interdisciplinary.net/critical-issues/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/edreitmpaper.pdf>.
- ³² Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 10.
- ³³ Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play*, 95.
- ³⁴ Ian Bogost offers a solution to this approach to video game criticism with his 'unit analysis'. *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).
- ³⁵ Jesper Juul. 'The Game, The Player, The World: Looking for a Heart of Gameness.' (Paper presented at *Level Up; Digital Games Research Conference*, Utrecht, 2003), <http://www.jesperjuul.net/text/gameplayerworld/>.
- ³⁶ Jenkins, 'Henry Jenkins Responds.'
- ³⁷ Geoffrey Rockwell. 'Gore Galore: Literary Theory and Computer Games,' *Computers and the Humanities* 36 (2002): 354.
- ³⁸ Jenkins, 'Henry Jenkins Responds.'
- ³⁹ Janet H. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (New York: The Free Press, 1997).
- ⁴⁰ E.g., Espen Aarseth, Jesper Juul and Markku Eskelinen.
- ⁴¹ E.g., Janet H. Murray and Henry Jenkins.
- ⁴² Genette, *Narrative Discourse*.
- ⁴³ Caillois, *Man, Play, Games*.
- ⁴⁴ Juul, 'Games telling stories?'
- ⁴⁵ Ian Bogost, *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).
- ⁴⁶ Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*.
- ⁴⁷ Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).
- ⁴⁸ Ian Bogost, 'Review of Convergence Culture, by Henry Jenkins,' *Water Cooler Games* (blog), August 1, 2006, http://www.bogost.com/watercoolergames/archives/review_of_conve.shtml;
- Jenkins, 'Response to Bogost.'
- ⁴⁹ Bogost, 'Review of Convergence Culture'; Jenkins, 'Response to Bogost.'
- ⁵⁰ Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 25.
- ⁵¹ Jenkins, 'Henry Jenkins Responds.'
- ⁵² Jenkins, 'Response to Bogost.'
- ⁵³ Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 113-122; Jenkins, 'Response to Bogost.'
- ⁵⁴ i.e., 'True' narratology, such being, as an example, Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, and his analysis of Proust.
- ⁵⁵ Jenkins, 'Response to Bogost.'
- ⁵⁶ Phil Fitzsimmons and Edie Lanphar 'Narrative Slips 'Between the Cup and the Lip': Transmedia 'Gaps' as Migratory Paths Between the *Hugos*,' in this volume.

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- ⁵⁷ Van Steenhuyse, 'Oh, the Angst!'; Ganzon, 'Control, Destroy, Merge, Refuse, Retake'; Edrei, 'For We Are Many.'
- ⁵⁸ Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 25.
- ⁵⁹ Ibid.
- ⁶⁰ Jenkins, 'Response to Bogost.'
- ⁶¹ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964), 7.
- ⁶² Ibid., 8.
- ⁶³ Ibid., 7.
- ⁶⁴ Murray, *Inventing the Medium*.
- ⁶⁵ Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, 71-90; Murray, *Inventing the Medium*, 51-85.
- ⁶⁶ Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, 71.
- ⁶⁷ Ibid.
- ⁶⁸ Ibid., 83.
- ⁶⁹ Bogost, *Unit Operations*.
- ⁷⁰ Ibid., 16-19.
- ⁷¹ Ibid., 3.
- ⁷² Ibid., 18.
- ⁷³ Ibid., 13.
- ⁷⁴ Juul, 'Games telling stories?'
- ⁷⁵ Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin. *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 1998).
- ⁷⁶ Strauss and Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research*, 22-23.
- ⁷⁷ 'Video Game Awards: 2011,' *spike.com*, last modified December 10 2011, accessed November 2, 2012, <http://www.spike.com/events/video-game-awards-2011/>.
- ⁷⁸ Aarseth, 'Beyond the Frontier?'; Juul, 'Games telling stories?'
- ⁷⁹ <http://www.metacritic.com/game/xbox-360/the-elder-scrolls-v-skyrim>; *Skyrim* can be played on the Playstation 3 console, the Xbox 360 console or on a PC. A few players' reviews appeared in the Xbox 360 category on Metacritic.com when they were actually playing the game from a PC, such as Alex's review discussed in this essay. These were retained as part of the sample for analysis.
- ⁸⁰ *Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* (Bethesda Softworks, 2006), Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, PC.
- ⁸¹ Suits, 'What is a Game?'; Suits, *The Grasshopper*, 34-41; Juul, 'The Game, The Player, The World.'
- ⁸² Matt Barton, *Dungeons & Desktops: The History of Computer Role-Playing Games* (Wellesley, MA: A.K. Peters, Ltd. 2008), 5.
- ⁸³ Barton, *Dungeons & Desktops*, 6.

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- ⁸⁴ Ibid.
- ⁸⁵ Aarseth, 'Beyond the Frontier.'
- ⁸⁶ Suits, *The Grasshopper*, 34-41; Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 23, 26-32.
- ⁸⁷ Aarseth, 'Beyond the Frontier,' 371.
- ⁸⁸ Juul, 'Games telling stories?'
- ⁸⁹ Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 25-27.
- ⁹⁰ 'Discrete readings' (Bogost) and 'game sessions' (Juul). Bogost, *Unit Operations*, 3; Juul, 'Games telling stories?'
- ⁹¹ Or, to use Genette's term, the 'narrating event.' *Narrative Discourse*, 25-27.
- ⁹² Aarseth, 'Beyond the Frontier.'
- ⁹³ Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 137, 113-122.
- ⁹⁴ Bogost, 'Rhetoric of Video Games,' 120.
- ⁹⁵ Murray, *Inventing the Medium*, 51-85; *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, 77-83.
- ⁹⁶ Murray, *Inventing the Medium*, 87.
- ⁹⁷ Ibid., 87-103.
- ⁹⁸ Ibid., 90, Figure 3.3.
- ⁹⁹ Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, 77-83.
- ¹⁰⁰ Juul, 'Games telling stories?'
- ¹⁰¹ Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 25-27.
- ¹⁰² Murray, *Inventing the Medium*, 51-85; *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, 77-83.
- ¹⁰³ Murray, *Inventing the Medium*, 92.
- ¹⁰⁴ Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, 83.
- ¹⁰⁵ Bogost, *Unit Operations*.
- ¹⁰⁶ Suits, 'What is a Game?'
- ¹⁰⁷ Suits, *The Grasshopper*, 34-41.
- ¹⁰⁸ Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 25-27.
- ¹⁰⁹ Jenkins, 'Henry Jenkins Responds in Turn.'
- ¹¹⁰ Ganzon, 'Control, Destroy, Merge, Refuse, Retake.'

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