Introduction

Out of the vast pantheon of visual and print media, a cultural leviathan is rising. Its ascendancy is undeniable: in 2011, the industry that it spawned became responsible for $65 billion dollars in global revenue. (Reuters 2011) This industry, the industry of the video game, is prodigious in both size and breadth of influence, spawning spin-off films, books, music and graphic novels in its undeniable potency and cultural penetration. But what is the appeal of the game that gives it its power? Is it the burgeoning quality of visual effects? The sometimes grandiose plot developments? Or is it the vividness of experience that the video game offers its player? The primary question: why video games are so entertaining, certainly lies outside of the scope of this paper, yet I would like to examine just one crucial aspect of the video game experience: the agency that games, particularly the games of the role-playing adventure genre, offer their players. In many ways, these games seem to offer a kind of semiotic interface through which players are able to work their will on the game in a variety of ways, impressing their own identity on the games, creating signs to which they are able to relate.

A particular phenomenon that first occurred to me as I was preparing this analysis seems to very appropriately illustrate this very process of finding personally associated signs within games. Consider a (now retrospectively) simple game title such as *Super Mario World*. In this game, which consists of running and jumping over deep chasms and various enemies, if I guided Mario over the lip of a precipice or into the sinister arms of a turtle-like "koopa" -- both fatal experiences for Mario -- I would find myself announcing that "I just died," in spite of the fact that I was physically unharmed and had simply lost a round of *Super Mario World*. Clearly, in the game world, there is more at stake than groupings of pixels; rather, to a certain extent, the player's experience of the game ties into a life and death struggle on a symbolic level. The

frequently-used name for this symbolic conflation is *immersion*. It is the experience of identifying personally with a situation or a character to the point that one becomes bound up in the outcome of the situation or the character's personal success. Video games trigger immersion through a spectrum of mechanics: some are easily noticeable, such as the increasingly realistic rendering of graphics; some, such as the ambient sounds of the video game environment, are much more subtle. This paper takes interest in one aspect of immersion: the narrative and its subordinating functions.

"Narrative" is a somewhat complex term: it tends to refer the simple act of telling a story. When a friend tells me a personal anecdote about meeting a celebrity, she is engaging in an act of narrative. But this act is not quite so simple a thing; rather, it is a collection of characteristics that culminate in a coherent story that includes characters, places and events, and generally functions on the principles of linear progression and climax. Works of literature and film are most commonly associated with narrative, highlighting and manipulating the structure and audience perception in various narrative styles. In spite of the deep entrenchment of film and literature as the premier modes of narrative entertainment, video games have come to increasingly use of complex narrative construction as an integral property of the game experience.

While games that use narrative often operate on the same procedure as other narrative media, they seem to engage the audience of the story in a unique way: the audience of a video game is also in the position of control. This position makes the player an active participant within the game realm and connects the individual's actions with the effects that the individual witnesses in the game environment. This unique role thus necessitates description with a term other than "reader" or "audience": the individual who experiences the video game becomes a

"player." This player's control over the events of the game may vary based on the game genre and style. Some games make the player fully active: to use *Super Mario World* once more, in the game, Mario can only move when the player directs his motion, the player is in full control of Mario's actions. A recent title, *Heavy Rain*, on the other hand, often automates the character's movement, prompting the player to act with controller button combinations where appropriate. This ability to take over the progress of the game is tied up with a sensation of *agency*, of power within a specific context; the freedom to make choices. A video game may provide the player with agency in any number of the game's facets: small aspects of the game such as character control and broader aspects such as narrative direction may fall under the player's sway, the latter of which most often appears in the role-playing adventure games that this paper will examine. A greater sense of control over the outcome of a game induces the player to feel a greater level of immersion. Agency in more aspects of the game allows for the player's influence to permeate the narrative thoroughly, leaving an indelible imprint of the player's self on the game: the player intertwines herself with the game -- for every piece of herself she puts into the game, the game leaves an equivalent mark in her

It is in this compelling realm of video game narrative analysis that I will remain. To facilitate my examination, I will divide this paper into three sections. The first two chapters will deal with two primary and interrelated aspects of narrative and the third chapter will change direction to examine the problems that arise in the immersive experience of the video game: Chapter One will use the 2008 Bethesda Softworks title, *Fallout 3*, to disassemble the more static plot mechanics of video games with reference to *Narratology* by Mieke Bal, *Cybertext* by Espen Aarseth and *A Thousand Plateaus* by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari; Chapter Two will add to *Fallout 3* a video game series, *Mass Effect*, examining the more specific function of the "player-

character" as the player's avatar within the game world, using Freud, Marx and Lacan for a theoretical foundation; I will close with the problematics of video game narrative, using game reviews as references for a discussion of how video games may fail to immerse the player and what consequences this has for video games as narrative and immersive texts.

Chapter 1: Narrative

Video Games and Story

In the past few decades, the video game has rapidly gained preeminence, not only as a mode of virtual entertainment, but as a means of conveying narrative. From its origins in text-based adventures (such as *Zork*) and narratively sparse visual games (like *Pong*), the medium has developed at an astonishing rate, giving game developers, over the course of a few decades, the ability to convey extremely complex and nuanced stories. The few years in particular have seen video games undergo another evolutionary step that highlights one of their most compelling aspects: the ability to promise a plurality of narrative texts by offering within the bounds of a single game manifold plot- directing choices, from which the player may choose at will.

The contemporary adventure role-playing game exemplifies this unique characteristic, one which is particular to the interactive game medium. By constructing a narrative based on interchangeable units of story that can be accessed or ignored at the player's discretion, the adventure game narrative can offer a multitude of potential narrative combinations that in turn can provide the player with a variety of experiences. In a game that utilizes this system to its full potential, it is possible for no two players to have exactly the same narrative experience. This characteristic offers a kind of narrative individuation that no other medium is capable of producing. By producing a narrative that the player can feel is his or her own, the video game immerses the player in its world, thereby inducing a sense of investment that alters the traditional narrative process by encouraging the player to become an active participant in the game's events.

Of course, not all games offer so many opportunities for individuation. Many adventure games still operate within a relatively linear narrative system, offering only a few optional "side-

quests" as a mode of narrative divergence. The text that this chapter will use as its basis, however, is not such a game; rather, *Fallout 3*, a recent role-playing adventure game produced by Bethesda Softworks, features an extremely flexible narrative system, which allows players to choose to pursue whichever of the vast multitude of plot threads they find desirable at any given moment. This open-ended structure displays the huge potential for contemporary role-playing games to immerse their players in narrative.

With a narrative structure that defies traditional linear narrative analysis, *Fallout 3* requires an analytical model that takes into account the game's potential for huge narrative diversity. Theorist Espen J. Aarseth offers an analysis of the ergodic text -- a text that is reliant on a cooperation of text and reader -- in his work, *Cybertext*. Aarseth's analysis, which provides a lens for viewing what he terms "multilinear" texts, gives us a useful model. But there are times -- *Fallout* 3 does, after all, promise a coherent narrative -- at which the ergodic model is still ineffective and must be reconciled with a more traditional narrative method. By analyzing *Fallout 3*'s narrative structure, this chapter will endeavor to show in precise terms where the areas of ergodics and narratology overlap and how the ergodic and narrative aspects of the game collaborate to invest and immerse players, keeping in mind how this analysis reflects on the role-playing adventure genre as a whole.

What Makes a Narrative Text?

The characteristic of any text that is most often immediately perceptible to the reader is the “story.” In film, literature and other media forms, the term “story” refers to the overarching hierarchical construct that encompasses the text’s various concrete factors: setting, events and

actors. In this sense, the story of a text comprises multiple groupings of these factors strung together: i.e. character x did y at z location which led to character a doing b.

This explanation, though useful in looking very generally at the organization of a text, is over-simplified. Mieke Bal provides a more detailed analysis of narative in *Narratology*, in which she describes three specific aspects of a narrative text: story, fabula and narrative. Fabula refers to the actual sequence of events from which the text is formed; the narrative is the relation of the fabula through an agent that is either within or without the events of the text; and the story is the result of interaction between narration and the fabula, through which the order of events may be rearranged to fit a specific goal or, as in modern novels, may present an alternative view through some discrepancy between the reader's perception of the fabula and the narrator's relation.

Bal also presents four roles within the narrative text that are necessary for its communication and its progression. These are the focalizor, the narrator, the actor and the reader, all of which are more intuitively defined roles. The narrator relates the fabula in which the actors participate, a role which is fairly nuanced and includes two differing species of narrator, the character-bound narrator and the external narrator(Bal 21). While some games include character-bound narrators (for instance, *Dragon Age II*), most seem to lack any explicit narrator, much akin to numerous contemporary films. This chapter will deal more directly with the narrative role later.

The focalizor, as Bal describes it, "is the represented 'colouring' of the fabula by a specific agent of perception." (Bal 18) This refers to the fact that some events of the fabula may be related while other events are omitted. In Dickens's *Great Expectations*, for instance, Pip finds himself the beneficiary of a mysterious benefactor. Since Pip is the focalizor of this

narrative and does not know the identity of his patron, the reader of the novel is left in the dark until the patron reveals himself to Pip. Were the novel to focalize Pip's benefactor instead of Pip, we would have discovered rather early on that he is the convict from Pip's childhood. As in the case of *Great Expectations*, the choice of focalizor can determine the driving forces in a text's narrative progression.

The roles of actor and reader are the last of the four narrative roles that Bal names. The reader, of course, is the receiver of the narrative, the individual for whom the narrative is intended; the actor is any agent existing within the scope of the narrative who engages in production of the narrative to any degree. While both of these roles possess rather apparent locations in the narrative process, they could not be more different in terms of the complexity of their roles in video games. Primarily, the actors in video games are Non-Player Characters (NPCs), which follow predictable patterns and inhabit clear-cut roles within the game proper. The reader, on the other hand, is a fickle role within narrative, unpredictable in its relation to the text as a whole due to its occupation of a subjective space. The reader's complexity is compounded in video games, as this chapter will show, but before that, we must take a moment to investigate *Fallout 3*, this chapter's primary text.

The World of *Fallout 3*

With this preliminary understanding of Mieke Bal's terminology for examining narrative (terminology I will, in fact, use throughout this discussion), we can begin to engage the primary text of this chapter. *Fallout 3* depicts what might be described as a tangential timeline in which most cultural development stalled in the early fifties and technological advancement shot

forward at least a century beyond modern society. The game's manual is perhaps most eloquent in describing that state of the world of *Fallout 3*:

> Imagine if, after World War II, the timeline had split. Our world forked into one branch, the Fallout universe the other. In that other branch, technology progressed at a much more impressive rate, while American society remained locked in the cultural norms of the 1950's. It was an idyllic "world of tomorrow," filled with servant robots, beehive hairdos, and fusion-powered cars. And then in the year 2077, at the climax of a long-running war with China, it all went to hell in a globe-shattering nuclear war.(*Fallout 3* Manual, 3)

The player's position in this dystopian alternate future is that of a human living in subterranean, self-contained bunkers termed "vaults." The vaults are shelters in which society managed to weather the devastation of the nuclear war between America and China and represent persisting nodes of culture and society. The player-character (the player's avatar within the game world, a.k.a. PC) inhabits Vault 101, which is governed by an overseer whose acute fear of the outside world has brought

Figure 1.1

about regulations that -- when the PC's father leaves the vault -- induce the other vault-dwellers to turn on the PC, forcing a hasty retreat from the confines of Vault 101.

Having escaped the vault, the player must reorient to the vast, practically overwhelming expanse of the Capitol Wasteland, named so because it occupies the region once known as Washington D.C. For the player, the first and greatest challenge in this newly-opened space is determining his or her next act. While in most games, post-expositional material maintains some strong sense of direction, the player of *Fallout 3* immediately faces an overwhelming quantity of options. Every inch of the map is explorable and nearly every inch contains something of at least passing interest. This is not to say that the player is given nothing on which to act: the player, on escaping the vault is provided the prompt, "Investigate the nearby town of Megaton for information about James." In spite of this slight sense of direction, the player nevertheless feels the weight of the multitude of options available outside of the vault. Figure 1.1 depicts the scene that the player encounters immediately after setting foot outside of Vault 101, and illustrates the daunting expansiveness and permeability of the Capitol Wasteland.

As the game progresses, the sense of being nearly overwhelmed by the size of the world only intensifies. The system of narrative advancement used by *Fallout 3* particularly exacerbates this sensation. Throughout the player's investigation of the Capitol Wasteland, she will come across various triggers for the game's "quests," tasks that she may choice to fulfill or not fulfill. These triggers could be anything from stumbling upon a hastily scrawled note to walking into the middle of a town only to step into the midst of an armed conflict between a self-styled superhero and his arch-nemesis. Encountering these triggers automatically puts a note in the player's log and initiates a quest. This allows players to often unwittingly stumble into quests in the middle of fulfilling some other task and can lead to the rapid accumulation of menial (or maybe not so

menial) tasks. This accumulation has the seemingly contradictory effects of both overwhelming the player intellectually and immersing the player even more deeply into the narrative by making her feel "plugged in" to the Wasteland's every detail.

Enjoying the Little Things

As a result of the sprawling landscape and the myriad hidden quests, the Capitol Wasteland proves a place in which one can easily become lost, lending by its very nature to the immersive properties of the game as a unit. But the game offers more than simply engrossing scenery in its bid for players' emotional and psychic investment. Because the player inhabits the role of the "Vault Dweller" (the PC), she finds herself in the place of an actor in an environment populated by NPC actors. The player possesses the ability to interact with both NPC's and the surrounding environment, and in that ability the player possesses the means to manipulate an investigate the world of *Fallout 3* in myriad ways, many of which leave indelible evidence of the player's existence within the game. No matter how miniscule or insignificant these changes may be, they represent the players activity within the developing narrative to which the game offers the player access. They stand in testament to the agency with which the game furnishes the player.

This ability to change even the smallest things in *Fallout 3* becomes an invaluable asset to the game's appeal as an immersive experience. Of course, there is certainly a substantial difference between picking up a fission battery sitting on a shelf and stealing the Declaration of Independence (both available actions in the game), but both represent the player's ability to affect the character of the wasteland and leave her mark. The fact that the player is capable of interacting so completely with the world of *Fallout 3* implies a state of perpetual narrative flux:

as long as the player is acting within the world -- exploring, talking to NPCs, fighting mutants or completing quests -- the player's experience of the game is evolving, developing, altering itself to meet new stimuli.

As a result, every second of engagement is reified, standing on its own in the midst of a legion of other differentiated experiences. This process is essentialized in the simplistic act of exploring the world of *Fallout 3*. Janet Murray, in her book *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, refers to a friend who complains that, when he plays his son's *Nintendo* system, "he is annoyed to be fighting all the time, since the combat is an unwelcome distraction from the pleasure of moving around the unfolding spaces of the maze."(Murray 129) Similarly, Tom Bissell, in *Extra Lives*, recalls a time playing *Fallout 3* in which he "made it to an isolated, hard-to-find corner of *Fallout 3*'s Wasteland and was greeted by the words FUCK YOU spray-painted on a rock."(Bissell 13) While exploring an environment does not produce and particularly direct narrative development, it allows for moments like Bissell's discovery, poignant experiences of witnessing the new or unusual or simply beautiful and poetic. Bissell also remarks on a moment in which he "was running up the stairs of what used to be Dupont Circle Metro Station and, as I turned to bash in the brainpan of a radioactive ghoul, noticed the playful way in which the high-noon sunlight streaked along the grain of my sledgehammer's wooden handle."(8) While unsettling, this type of experience keys into the value of the player's agency within the environment and that agency's not-insubstantial effect on the player's experience within the game.

Actor and Focalizor

One particular episode in *Fallout 3* not only evidences the player's immersion through agency, but also displays the limits of agency and in what capacity these limits are capable of lending to immersion. Discussion of this episode additionally lends itself to analysis of the roles of actor and focalizor in the text of *Fallout 3*. The roles of focalizor and actor in narrative presentation are so essential as to be missed or ignored in analysis, yet they perform crucial roles in the narrative organization of the game. The actors of the game, aside from the player character, are represented primarily by the multitude of NPCs scattered throughout the Capitol Wasteland. These NPCs range from set pieces that only offer repetitive, uninformative dialogue, to active companions that travel with you throughout the game. While the former may seem less like actors and more like virtual environment objects, they can, given the right provocation, be driven to action. Attacking or stealing from an NPC may provoke an altercation that results in a fistfight, a gunfight or the player-character's apprehension by a representative of the law.

Though NPCs are often placed in a reactive position, waiting for the player to activate them, their reactions to the player's choices are often ungovernable and at times unpredictable. For instance, in the Tenpenny Tower episode, the player is faced with the post-apocalyptic equivalent of a gated community. Located in a derelict hotel, this community excludes a group of mutated humanoids called ghouls living in the nearby sewers. The player, faced with this scenario, must choose to help the ghouls break into the tower, help the tower's superintendent, Tenpenny, exterminate the ghouls or find a relatively peaceful means of obtaining entry rights on behalf of the ghouls. Should the player choose negotiation – seemingly the most peaceful option – the ghouls will be brought in to the tower to cohabitate with the humans. If the player returns several days later, all of the tower's human residents will have disappeared. Upon inquiry, the

ghouls will simply say that the two parties were unable to get along, but if the player sneaks into the locked basement, she finds the corpses of every human resident. This kind of "unwinnable" challenge presents the player with the realization that the modicum of control offered in the game is not infinite and that the game can easily change the rules to prevent the player's success. It does, however, also engage the player in what seems to be a living, breathing world, one which in its vicissitudes of non-compliant imperviousness induces in the player a sense of engaging in a complex and fully-functioning world, heightening the player's immersion in the setting as a whole.

The denial of control that sometimes arises from the game's more tyrannical moments is offset by the agency offered in the player's abilities as the focalizor of the narrative. *Fallout 3*, like many contemporary games, allows player control of the game's "camera," permitting an adjustable perspective. *Fallout 3* offers this from a first-person perspective, allowing a sensation analogous to voluntarily turning one's head. Through this mechanic, the game induces a sense of agency in the player by permitting the player to actively determine what to look at and what to ignore, thus allowing the player to manipulate how she perceives the narrative.

Throughout the narrative we can imagine voluntary (or even involuntary) instances of narrative manipulation through camera control. One such presents itself at the beginning of the game. Immediately after the player exits the vault, she may come across the first inhabited town in the Capitol Wasteland, Megaton. The town, named for the undetonated nuclear warhead that lies at its center, is being visited by a Mr. Burke, who asks for the player's help in detonating the bomb at the center of down. Supposing the player chooses to assist, upon arming the bomb, she will be invited to Tenpenny Tower nearby and asked to press the detonator. Upon pressing the detonator the player might choose to look away from the blast, choosing instead to see Mr.

Burke's reaction to the destruction or even choosing to walk away as if nothing happened, ignoring the blast entirely. The shift in focalization that these choices effect have a pronounced result in the player's perception of the events, altering the manner in which the events are internally narrated, illustrating the fact that the user's agency within the game has a considerable effect on how the narrative coalesces. This agency often allows the user to mold the events of the game into a personally pleasing form. A narrative that fulfills the player's demands is more likely to elicit immersive investment from the player.

The Wasteland and the Maze

As the Tenpenny Tower episode illustrates, the creators of *Fallout 3* present the game as a text possessing more kinship with an essay prompt than a novel. The game begins, uniquely, with the birth of the main character, i.e. the player. In the subsequent minutes of gameplay, which are presented as a kind of interactive montage in which the player learns the game's mechanics, we learn that the character's mother died in labor, leaving the father to raise the player character. The montage ends seventeen years later with the father's disappearance and the character's ejection into the barren wasteland of post-apocalyptic Washington D.C. At this moment, what has been mostly a linear narrative instantaneously expands outward into a realm of overwhelming possibilities, as if the game is prompting the player: *you are ejected into a world in which anything is possible and morality is not compulsory. What will you do?*

The game, as it proceeds from this point, is propelled by what the game's vocabulary terms "quests." These quests, often constituting independent story arcs, are sometimes compiled in the form of larger narrative arcs. This constructive formula presents each quest arc within the game proper as a simple, linear narrative experience with an intelligible fabula; however, the

absence of narrative interaction between individual arcs presents each arc as an individuated, independent node within the game. This individuation, which balks any narrative subordination, allows each arc an even narrative weight, but also threatens to induce disorienting discontinuity in the game's fabula.

The freedom of movement that *Fallout 3* provides the user further complicates the interrelation of quests, even within a given arc. As a matter of course, the user is capable of abandoning the current quest at any given point, either to attend to another quest or simply to wander the Capitol Wasteland in order to garner more experience points and further develop the player character. Any such departure produces a rupture in the narrative arc of a given quest, producing an effect similar to splicing a film reel. This splicing reformats the arc by either stalling or redirecting narrative momentum.

The above characteristics bear a striking resemblance to one of the most often cited texts in hypertext and cybertext scholarship. Felix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze's A Thousand Plateaus formulates a theory based on the 'rhizome,' a structure which attempts to eliminate internal narrative subordination, creating a text that can be read in a number of ways by changing the order of its constituent parts or altering the network of associations made between those parts. George Landow cites *A Thousand Plateaus* in *Hypertext 2.0*, a discussion of hypermedia. Landow explains that "one of the principles of reading and writing hypermedia -- as in exploring a library of printed books -- lies in the fact that one can begin anywhere and make connections...Such a characteristic organization derives from the rhizome's fundamental opposition to hierarchy."(Landow 39) Espen Aarseth, in *Cybertext: Perspectives in Ergodic Literature*, also comments on the rhizome, equating it with Umberto Eco's net maze and citing Eco to explain that, like the rhizome, "the net's 'every point can be connected with every other

point.' (Aarseth 6) By these accounts, the rhizome is a construct of proximity and potentiality. If travel to any given point is possible at any moment, the purpose of the rhizome is not, as with Eco's other maze paradigms, extrication so much as it is exploration. Because the rhizome is connected at every point to every other point, it offers perpetual proximity to the entrance and exit; offers the promise of knowledge and discovery and opposes the linear and multilinear labyrinths' claustrophobic compulsion to escape. Furthermore, each of the individual quests, viewed in the larger context of the fully neutral state of the game, that initial point at which anything is possible and any quest may eventually be fulfilled or ignored; each quest becomes a self-contained node that speaks on its own behalf, yet relies on the whole for context. It is like the plateau that is "always in the middle, not at the beginning or the end...a continuous, self-vibrating region of intensities whose development avoids any orientation toward a culmination point or external end."(*A Thousand Plateaus* 21-22) This invites, even commands the user's immersion in the game and presents a challenge that the user cannot but approach by investing herself in the game's proceedings.

But the rhizome is not entirely ideal for our purposes. The opening sequence illustrates the primary deficiency rhizome as a model for the narrative in *Fallout 3*. "Perhaps one of the most important characteristics of the rhizome," Deleuze and Guattari claim, "is that it always has multiple entryways." (12) *Fallout 3* contradicts this with its introduction, which presents only one way to enter into the Capitol Wasteland: by being ejected from the vault. This short segment is enough to create a subordinating narrative through which the rest of the game's events must be viewed. It regiments the player's actions proceeding from that point of origin and organizes them within a single, linear progression. This is not to say, however, that the narrative of *Fallout*

3 presents a single, unvarying, linear model; rather, it permits the construction of that narrative from a semi-rhizomal base.

Espen Aarseth presents a somewhat more congruent model for Fallout 3's structure in the multilinear maze. Aarseth uses Umberto Eco's multilinear maze to describe the reader's experience of an ergodic text. He uses an edition of Nabokov's *Pale Fire* with an included commentary as a sample of the multicursal model's application, explaining that the text "can be read either unicursally, straight through, or multicursally, by jumping between the comments and the poem." (Aarseth 8) Aarseth's observation is flawed insofar as it mistakes a topologically linear reading of the text (reading through the poem and then through the commentary) for a paradigm in itself as opposed to a single aspect of the multilinearity of the text, yet this concept provides a solid base for considering *Fallout 3* narratively.

The first advantage that the multicursal maze model has over the rhizome is that it accounts for the act of topological exploration, a consideration that is important with respect to a game like *Fallout 3*, which relies on physical investigation of a virtual environment as a means of conveying its narrative. The rhizome, on the other hand, is a more appropriate model for intellectual abstraction. Examining the nodal structure of the quests and potential game events that coalesce into groups of realized and unrealized once the player is introduced, we find that every event is independent and equally weighted. The user must, however, choose a path through the potential, choosing to actuate some events and bypass others, stratifying and classifying each event and giving each its own value as the narrative materializes. Thus it seems that the rhizome and the multicursal maze models work together to form the narrative in *Fallout 3*. The multicursal model, as I have previously shown, subordinates the rhizomal organization (or lack thereof) of the available game decisions in actual gameplay, yet the rhizome is

perpetually present, permitting the player the freedom to disengage from any given portion of the game at any time and redirect the narrative through deliberate action.

The Hidden Narrator

The existence of a narrator is vital in presenting *Fallout 3* as a narrative text. There is, however, one difficulty: *Fallout 3*, as I have explained above, has no native representation of a narrator. This is not normally an issue: most narrative texts use third person narration, a style that often omits the narrator's identity if it is not relevant to the narrative. Mieke Bal calls this type of unknown narrator an "External Narrator."(Bal 21) In the case of *Fallout 3* we might imagine that the same holds true, that the story is being told implicitly by an external party. Aarseth claims that this party is none other than the programmer of the game, who has written the script that will guide the player.

In the case of *Fallout 3*, the programmer may indeed be implicitly narrating the events of the game, at least on a small scale. Since *Fallout 3* comprises a free-roam "sandbox" environment, in which most of the narrative progression is produced through the fulfillment of quests, the programmer has control over the potential outcomes of each of the quests or episodes, which, combined, produce a coherent narrative. Nevertheless, the programmer cannot wholly influence the order in which episodes are completed or by what means they are completed. These aspects of the game's narrative are left to the player. It is as though the player has been given a deck of cards that may be ordered at will within certain loose guidelines. If this is the case, the programmer cannot be the implied narrator of the entire game experience.

The player fills this narrative aporia by choosing the overall purpose, trajectory, organization and methodology of his or her gameplay. When a player is given options, the

choice that the player makes is often determined by the player's individual goals. In the Tenpenny Tower episode, the player may choose to exterminate the ghouls by reason of a sense of outrage at their mutated existence. Alternatively, the player may help to kill the tower's residents because of an aversion to prejudices or a simple desire for mayhem, perhaps even carrying out the deed independently instead of allowing the ghouls to do the dirty work. These kinds of choices of process and purpose determine how the player will perceive the events of the game. He or she may think, "I did that because it was right" or "I did this because it was the easiest solution." These interactions with the game and its contents suggest a kind of self-narration that a number of other theorists have suggested. Lev Manovich, in *The Language of New Media*, claims that "In the process of interaction [with the new media object] the user can choose which elements to display or which paths to follow, thus generating a unique work. In this way the user becomes the co-author of the work."(Manovich 49) This concept of "co-authorship" is not at all distant from the conceptualization of the player as a co-narrator of the sandbox adventure game.

Through this co-authorial interaction, the player and the game are complicit in the creation of a narrative that lies external to both. The game – and, implicitly, the programmer – contributes the prompt, or the scenarios to which the player must react. The player, in response, engages in a self-narrating process, essentially reflexively communicating to him- or herself the events of the story that subsequently transpire. This narrative wellspring, which forms out of the player-game interaction, must be external to both the player and the game because, while both may temporarily internalize the influence of the other, both are simultaneously projecting their influence outward as a response to the influence of the other; thus, the point at which this narrative font exists lies somewhere between the realm of the human and the realm of the

machine. Therefore it seems appropriate to refer to the result – using the popular neologism as a base – as an ergodic narrative, a narrative formed by the interaction and cooperation of human and machine.

Player-God

As this chapter has shown, the PC becomes the focal point for the four narrative roles of Mieke Bal's *Narratology*. Conflation of the roles of narrator, actor, reader and focalizor in the player-character (which is cohabitated by the reader) realizes a unique narrative product: the seemingly omnipotent player, the conduit through whom narrative progress must occur and without whom narrative progress cannot possibly occur. The *a priori* condition of the adventure RPG is that all of its events depend upon a single actor, the PC, without whom, narrative stagnates. In this sense, video games differentiate themselves entirely from film and literature, media which traditionally exist in pre-ordained, prescriptive forms. While, in a sense, the game has already been written -- its full expanse is plain to see for those who are capable of understanding the programming language -- it is not written in the same sense as *Casablanca* or *Pride and Prejudice*. Elizabeth will always fall in love with Mr. Darcy and Ilsa will always get on the plane whether or not anyone is reading the book or watching the film because that is how those events are recorded. *Fallout 3*, on the other hand, insists on the presence of a player, depends on it because without the player, the bulk of the game's narrative agents are missing in action.

Herein lies the most important difference between the bulk of more traditional media(like literature and film) and ergodic texts. Narrative media of the traditional style engage in goal-oriented pleasure: the pleasure of the climax and of release, the pleasure of the musical dominant

and cadential progressions (these forms tend to value results over process, though this is not to deny that some enjoyment is bound up in the journey). Cybertext, on the other hand -- especially video games that engage the player as *Fallout 3* does -- is constructed on the rhizome, for which entry and exit are meaningless endeavors and exploration is the *raison d'être*. Thus, it employs a pleasure of process resembling Lacan's *jouissance*. In fact, *Fallout 3*, with its nigh-inexhaustible wellspring of challenges and tasks allows the player to drive the formation of the narrative, to perpetuate it for as long as her stamina permits. In so doing, the game offers the best approximation of a text rooted in *jouissance*, in the hyperbolic pursuit of pleasure.

The player of *Fallout 3*, locked into a cycle of *jouissance*, taking the pleasure of narrative involvement from the game at will, illustrates the extent of the difference between cybertext and traditional media. Film and literature fall under the category of what Barthes terms "the readerly." The readerly text, in Barthes's opinion leaves the reader "with no more than the poor freedom either to accept or reject the text." (S/Z 4) Barthes opposes the control of the readerly to the pure freedom of "the writerly," the form of text that is "a perpetual present" characterized by "*ourselves writing*."(5) To him, the writerly, like the cybertext, is a text of process, defined not by what is produced (if anything can be finalized as a product of the writerly), but by *how* it is produced.(ibid) The writerly, in spite of this crucial parallel, seems to evoke far more freedom than the text of *Fallout 3*, or any cybertext for that matter, can provide. Where the writerly text offers up the experience of writing and the infinite expanse of possibility implied therein, *Fallout 3* can only crudely approximate such unfettered freedom. While the player may immerse herself in the constant ebb and flow of narrative-in-process, she must still operate within the confines of the world she has been given. *Fallout 3* therefore turns its back on both readerly and writerly, choosing instead to occupy the interstitial space mediating the two, the space that represents

perpetual growth towards writerly, but excludes its attainment because it is rooted irremediably in the readerly.

Transclusion

Fallout 3, with its unconventional expression of traditional narrative elements -- particularly the four primary narrative agents -- and its melding of narrative text with ergodic text shows the potential that is inherent in the video game genre and cybertextin general. The inclusion of the player as an active participant in the narrative's formative process allows for a degree of agency on the part of the player that cannot be found in other media forms. The text's approach induces a sense of being "plugged in" that allows the player to invest more fully in the game world and the events that occur therein. The mechanics and layout of the game further nourish the player's investment, allowing her to engage with the world on a personal level.

To review, we have seen that this broad narrative engagement occurs on several levels: first, on the level of independent one-on-one interactions, the player's signing of the geographic and social landscape that *Fallout 3* provides as a canvas; the repetitive *jouissance* of quest location and fulfillment is the second order of engagement; the last and most indispensible is the writerly pleasure of molding the game's events. These pleasures function as a whole to bring the player's sympathies and identity closer to the text, helping her to attain a sense of being active within the game and of being immersed in the narrative.

This chapter has gone over only the broad strokes of the player's interaction with the world at large. It has examined the effects that the player's actions can have on the game world and the subsequent feedback that those actions induce. In this cyclical structure of cause and effect, the player acts and is acted on simultaneously, immersing her in a causal chain that

implicates and immerses her in the game world. Still to be dealt with, however, are the means through which the player investigates and acts on the game world. The next chapter will discuss not only this, but also the nature of the cycle in which the player is bound in her interaction with the game.

Chapter 2: Player-Character Creation, Identification and Investment

Introduction

The potential flexibility of the video game narrative may offer the player agency within a virtual world, but only if the player is herself provided an agent within that virtual world. Mieke Bal describes a focalizing agent as the organ of the process in which the audience's narrative experience is focused (focalization), showing that for a narrative to coalesce, there must be some embodiment of the narrative process contained within the text. In the case of the role-playing video game, the focalizor, the conduit through which the player experiences the game's narrative is called the "player-character"(PC). The PC is a hybrid that bridges the space between real and virtual, becoming the player's eyes and ears within the game proper, acting, speaking and sometimes thinking on behalf of the player. In some games, the character is tantamount to a doll that can be manipulated through a virtual environment by virtual means, while other games work to nearly transform the PC into a co-signifier for the player, an alter-ego that the player assumes within the game world. The former produces a less immersive experience for the player; the latter, an intensely immersive experience that induces the level of identification that showed itself recently, though not for the first time, in the *World of Warcraft* craze.

The most common means of inducing the player to identify with the PC is empowerment. The PC, like a video game narrative, is a body possessing the capacity for engaging high levels of agency, a body upon which the player can "write" (or co-write) specific identifying features. And, as in the case of narrative, the player achieves this by making choices. Hence, the more choices a player is given in the creation and maintenance of the PC, the more the player comes to associate with the in-game persona. Video games can allow this identification in several ways:

offering customizable character attributes; presenting the character's world as mutable, hence putting the character's relationship to that world in question; commodifying in-game items, the collection and manipulation of which can lead to a fully individuated PC; or a combination of all of these methods.

This chapter will deal with the PCs of *Fallout 3* and the science fiction role-playing series entitled *Mass Effect*. It will use these games as models for identifying the processes by which player-character identification occurs. The discussion's primary focuses will be the construction, manipulation and development of the PC as an extension or a representative of the human player in the virtual realm. By looking at specific processes and events that allow for control of the PC as and within a narrative space, this chapter will show how the player's influence on the PC forms an complex identification that supplies agency. This agency ultimately translates into immersive identification with the PC and, through the PC's subordination to the overall narrative of the game, further immersion in the game narrative.

Restoring Identity: *Mass Effect*

The *Mass Effect* trilogy is a series of science fiction adventure games in which the player takes on the role of Commander Shepard, a human soldier living in a universe in which humanity has made contact and established a rapport with alien species across the galaxy. In each installment of the trilogy, the player obtains a ship in which to traverse the galaxy, exploring planets and engaging in missions that may or may not further the game's primary narrative. While the division of tasks between primary missions and secondary "assignments" suggests a loose narrative structure, the narrative design of the *Mass Effect* trilogy proves more rigid than what the last chapter investigated in *Fallout 3*. The galaxy does offer great narrative potential

with a wealth of survey-able planets to investigate, yet relatively few planets offer the opportunity for any kind of intensive first-hand exploration. Additionally, the narrative is constructed in a manner that centralizes a primary narrative arc that, for all of its mutability, insists on its own completion. Unlike *Fallout 3*, in which, once in the game proper, the player obtains full access to all map locations, *Mass Effect* cordons off some regions of the galaxy until the player triggers an event that moves the primary narrative forward. The result is essentially a primary narrative that subordinates any tangential narrative developments, forcing all unrelated game events into parabolic orbit of the central plot arc.

While *Mass Effect* does not offer the sheer freedom of a more exclusively ergodic narrative, it does offer one hugely immersive mechanism: a highly flexible player-character. The game opens in a curtain-drawing gesture -- with some interesting metaphysical implications -- that presents the screen of the game as a computer screen on which a corrupted file must be rebuilt. The file offers the name, Commander Shepard, and prompts the player to arrange the traits of the individual to whom that name belongs. The options are broad, ranging from gender to facial features (cheekbone height, brow ridge, mouth shape) to hair color and even so far as to aspects of a broad outline of Shepard's personal history, an option that affects the content of in-game dialogue. Author Tom Bissell, in *Extra Lives,* illustrates the purpose of the PC's flexibility in the words of *Mass Effect*'s head writer, Drew Karpyshyn, who seems to

Figure 2.1

channel the majority of role-playing adventure fans when he claims, "I don't really identify with the premade character...When I make a character -- even if I don't make the character look like me -- that is the character I'm inhabiting through the game."(Bissell 110) Kapyshyn's comment captures the most vital element of the character-building process: that it offers an empowering moment through which the player engages in a sympathetic relationship with the player-character. The player's choices in building a character in any game, not only *Mass Effect*, mark the beginning of the synchronization of real and virtual identities.

Character creation is only an exposition of the player's relationship with the PC, a relationship that will continue to develop throughout the player's PC-mediated experience of the narrative. From the beginning of the narrative proper, *Mass Effect* offers decisions that affect the player-character's immediate environment consistently offering the player choices in the form of dialogue options -- a set of responses to NPC prompts from which the player must choose in order to advance in-game dialogue -- which may at times branch out in their effects, offering different outcomes for different dialogue choice combinations. *Mass Effect 2* further develops dialogue options by periodically giving cues for the player to engage in "paragon" or "renegade" options by pressing a corresponding button on the controller, causing Shepard to promptly engage in a "heroic" paragon action, often presented as a valiant gesture, or a "bold" renegade move. In one scenario, for instance, Shepard may encounter a young man attempting to sign up with mercenaries and has the option to take a Paragon prompt and stop him by taking away his gun. Certain choices will affect future game events (though the arc of the story remains, in its general form, static) and determine whether NPC's will view Shephard as a hero, a villain or something in between. The player also collects companions -- referred to as squad members -- along the way and may choose to build relationships with them by engaging in optional missions

on their behalf or even romancing them. The game also opens the possibility of alienating companions who disagree with the Shepard's actions and even produces several situations that can force the player to personally kill or abandon squad members.

Mass Effect's most intriguing feature is its ability to transfer the player's "Shepard" from previous games to subsequent games. The player can, in effect, load a PC profile from the gaming machine's memory and play *Mass Effect 2* with the same version of Shepard that she created in *Mass Effect*. This means that, although reputation and, in some cases, experience do not carry over, the consequences of in-game decisions from *Mass Effect* manifest in *Mass Effect 2*, and the player's choices in both of the first two titles affect the narrative background of *Mass Effect 3*. The persistence of a unique player-character that bears with it all of the history that gameplay has accrued pushes against the psychological barrier of the switch between series titles. The switch, which tends to rupture the player's in-game identity, becomes insignificant when faced with a player-character with the ability to transcend in-game boundaries. The character becomes a type, epitomizing the player's idea of hero, anti-hero, enigma, or whatever the player might imagine her Shepard to embody. Shepard's ability to transcend a single game implies a state of permanence -- even if it is only virtual -- that pushes the identities of player and the PC into an even more imminent relationship.

"Born This Way": *Fallout 3*

Fallout 3 bears striking similarities to *Mass Effect* in its treatment of character customization. The player determines physical attributes, skills and relationship to the world in similar ways, using the stock customization screens to manipulate details and finesse the player-character to desired specifications and letting in-game actions determine the way the game world

views the player-character. The primary difference between the games is in their handling of game-opening process and the way it attempts to invest the player in the player-character's being.

Mass Effect seems to operate on the presumption that Shephard is a pre-existing entity. The beginning of the game, the reconstruction of a "corrupted file," implies that the player is inhabiting a pre-existing body, that Shepard has existed all along and that, while the player experiences the game simultaneously with Shepard, who the player herself has created, the player is nonetheless taking on a role, a role that has a history that is known, yet impossible to experience in the context of the game. If this is the thesis of *Mass Effect*'s character creation method, *Fallout 3* takes the opposite approach, an approach that, strangely, produces a very similar effect. *Fallout 3* begins, quite literally, at the beginning: with the player-character's birth. The first-person angle gives the impression of the player-character opening its eyes for the first time, from which point the game offers up a montage-like production of the player-character's childhood and adolescence. The purpose of this feature of the game is to effectively integrate the tutorial, an often cumbersome and narratively bereft segment of the game, into a more narratively productive process. The player determines the player-character's physical attributes in the moments after birth, learns to walk at the moment the player-character takes its first steps, determines basic faculties in the format of a children's book and selects skills and

Figure 2.2: *Fallout 3* character creation

abilities by taking a special aptitude test. The first moments of the game allow the player to invent her in-game embodiment through a natural progression that begins, vitally, with a blank surface.

The process evokes the sensation of being "reborn," of being reproduced in a new world by a "natural" process. *Fallout 3*, by imitating the beginning of life, calls the player to treat the game as a rebirth or a second life. The player thus carries her identity over into the game using the player-character body as a surrogate operating parallel to her physical body. The invocation of birth to represent the beginning of a second life is not new. It is present in the Christian sacrament of baptism, in which, originally, the recipient was submerged in water and brought out, reborn into a Christian life. A more contemporary example is the 1999 film, *The Matrix* in which Neo, the film's protagonist, awakens from the virtual reality of the Matrix in a womb-like pod and is flushed through a vaginally substitutive tube to emerge, like a newborn, into the blinding light of reality. *Fallout 3* inverts the latter of these examples, pushing the player-character into its (and the player's) new virtual life through a simulated "natural" birth.

Through the Looking Glass (The Screen and the Mirror)

The moment at which the player determines the player-character's physical attributes in games like *Mass Effect* or *Fallout 3* offers a surreal and emotionally charged experience. It is a decision that determines how the player wishes to present herself in the game proper, akin to choosing her own biological body. The outcome of the player's choice is permanent and as such must be treated delicately. As the player cycles through features and adjusts them, she chooses features that are compatible with an aspect of her own self-image, whether the player-character's

image becomes the embodiment of an ideal, a parody of an ideal or an original or the representation of an inner self.

The final moment, in which the player affirms the model's likeness by selecting the button that proclaims "ACCEPT" or "CONFIRM," is a moment of silent identification, in which the player sees the representation of herself that she has created and mentally affirms, "this is me." "I will be this." A moment such as this, a moment of reflection, affirmation and identification recalls Lacan's "mirror stage," a theorized point in a child's development in which the child constructs itself as a subject and the signified of "I." This first decision is also the beginning of a series of choices and experiences that parallel a fragmented version of the self-identifying process of Lacan's mirror stage and which, in the case of *Fallout 3*, make up the game's tutorial.

Rather than a discovery of a pre-formed self as a subject, the physical attribute selection screen offers a space in which the player may project subjectivity onto the newly-created player-character. This projection is necessary: the player subjects herself to the language of the game and the realm of video game discourse through the only access point the game allows to exist. But the act of projection is also voluntary. For the self as a subject to take a new signified into its span means that the self finds the new body, the player-character body, compliant with the specific qualifications that the signifier, "I," delineates. These specifications come together as the independent physical traits that the player chooses to form what Lacan refers to as a "Gestalt," a wholeness or fullness of being, "the statue in which man projects himself."(442) The Gestalt often represents an archetype of moral physiognomy: the bearded recluse, the lithe femme-fatale, the muscular brawler, the wiry intellectual. It establishes in its fulfillment of these archetypes "the symbolic matrix in which the I is precipitated in a primordial form."(ibid) The

PC's image must fulfill the demands of the player, demands constructed on the "Ego-ideal" of Freud's theory, and when these demands are fulfilled, the ego-ideal imprints itself onto the image prepared for it, embeds itself in the lines that it etched with its own being. Finally, the player may engage in the "jubilant assumption of his specular image"(ibid), taking on the role of the PC and immersing herself in the character's being and reality.

With the image of the player-character fresh in her mind, the player proceeds into the movement section of the tutorial for *Fallout 3*. This is the point at which the player learns to move the player-character and take control of her virtual faculties, a process that takes place, appropriately enough, in the stage of the tutorial-montage in which the PC takes its first steps. At this point in the process, the player begins to "establish a relationship between the organism and its reality,"(443) orienting the Innenwelt -- as Lacan terms it -- of the player with the virtual Umwelt of the player-character. In this process of orientation, the player-character takes on a more complete role as surrogate body, associating real tactile actions in the form of button combinations on the controller with virtual physical responses in the player-character's body. Move a control stick and the legs walk, move another stick and the head turns. The body in pieces that the separate control combinations represent is unified in the controller and in the recollection of the image that the player has already created. The player immerses her body in the body of the player-character and, while the motions do not fully correspond, the alignment of real physicality with virtual physicality induces a tactile engagement that makes the relationship both mental and physical, thus providing the player with a greater sense of control and a more immersive experience. This stage of identification equates with the moment in the mirror stage in which the child engages "in a series of gestures in which he experiences in play the relation

between the movements assumed in the image and the reflected environment, and between the virtual complex and the reality it reduplicates."(442)

Mass Effect and *Fallout 3* both offer the character customization screen, but they also provide a moment of reaffirming inversion for the aspect of the mirror stage that character customization exhibits. Both games present similar "death" cinematics: they both follow an upward track and pan down as the player-character's lifeless husk sinks to the ground. The experience implies a kind of out-of-body experience. In the moment of the player-character's death, the player is severed from the body, whether this means leaving the first-person perspective --as in *Fallout 3* -- or cutting the tether that keeps the camera floating -- as in *Mass Effect* -- in an over-the-shoulder position. The camera movement, associating itself with death and failure within the game, becomes a dissociating motion burdened with trauma. The separation from the body becomes an unpleasant experience for the player, suggesting to her at the same time and by simple logic that continued attachment to the body is a pleasurable experience. The player associates the player-character's life with wholeness and its death with rupture, investing her own pleasure in the player-character's being. In seeing her surrogate body destroyed from an external perspective, the player is reminded of and reinforced in her identification with the virtual body.

Adventures in Tutorials

While the tutorial experience of *Fallout 3* is not fully indicative of the genre as a whole, it does provide several interesting situations that help to induce the player into engaging more fully as the PC. These portions of the childhood montage/tutorial section of *Fallout 3* utilize several tactics in to this end: tactics including the comforting presence of a children's book and the self-

mapping procedure of a humorous aptitude test. Keeping in mind that the goal of this chapter is to look at the manner in which immersion in character is induced as a subordinate process to narrative immersion, it seems appropriate to touch on these stages of the tutorial momentarily.

The tutorial phase that immediately follows the player's physical orientation -- described above -- is organized around a children's book that the player uses to manipulate the PC's natural attributes: these include details like the PC's strength, intelligence, natural dexterity and luck. The manipulation of these attributes is standard in any role-playing game and forms the foundation of the player's style of interacting with the world: for instance, high intelligence in *Fallout 3* means a greater aptitude in science and computers, allowing the player to hack into computer terminals or fix robots; the format, on the other hand, presents a unique approach to this aspect of PC customization. While most versions of attribute customization -- such as *Mass Effect*'s handling of a similar process -- have a dissociative effect on the player, presenting a screen that literalizes the process and makes the player entirely aware of what she is doing, *Fallout 3*'s use of a format as comforting and familiar as a children's book makes the entire system feel more natural, perpetuating the illusion of the player inhabiting the PC's body. Operating on a parallel plane is a cognitive association that forms when the player associates her own actions with those of the PC. The PC's in-game act of reading the children's book is occurring at the same time in the player's realm. Both the PC and the player are reading the same book at the same time, a connection that the player makes on an unconscious level that helps her to identify her own engagement with the game world as a mirror of the PC's engagement with the same world.

Later in the tutorial, the player is faced with a sort of wryly humorous aptitude test, which determines the areas in which the PC is skilled (e.g. picking locks, picking pockets, repairing

machines) and therefore what approaches to the game will ultimately become her fortè. Bissell comments on the narrative economy and interactive inventiveness of this part of the tutorial(9), also noting that "many of the questions(one asks what you would do if your grandmother ordered you to kill someone) are morbidly amusing."(ibid) To Bissell, what is important is that the test customizes the PC indirectly, meaning that the results are -- if the player answers as truthfully as possible(when possible) -- indicative of the player's personal character. While the humor is comfortingly disarming and the context engages the player in a progression of customization that feels natural and, as a result, pleasurable, the truly immersive characteristic of the aptitude test as a customizing agent is its ability to push the player to make decisions without any idea as to what the effects on the PC will be. The indirect technique that the game employs encourages the player to make decisions that are more instinctive than informed and thus make the PC feel more naturally suited to her personality and individual style, creating an externalized typology that, like the moral physiognomy of the PC's body, allows the player to fill a role that is more engaging because she is the one who wrote it.

Welcome to the Machine: Desire, Production and "Plugging in"

Several times throughout this paper, I have used the phrase, "plug in," to relate the aspect of immersion that produces in the player the sense of being connected or tied to the game's narrative in one way or another. This phrase seems particularly appropriate in a virtual environment: when one "plugs in," one essentially builds a bridge from the electrical impulses of the human brain to the electrical currents of the game console or computer motherboard. As with any circuit, the relationship is a circular stream, flows of information pass through one node and continue into the other naturally and much of the pleasure that the player of a game

experiences is bound up in the establishment and maintenance of this stream. In their first discussion of capitalism and schizophrenia, entitled *Anti-Oedipus*, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari prepare the concepts that will become the foundation for their later work, *A Thousand Plateaus*, which I have already discussed. *Anti-Oedipus* attempts to forge a path between Marx and Freud, using their theory as a basis, but simultaneously attempts to avoid entering any already established territory that will define their work as "Marxist" or "Freudian." In this effort, they attempt to establish new models for discussing phenomena in psychology and sociology. One of these concepts, that of the "desiring machine," becomes extremely useful in an examination of the relationship between player and played, between human and video game.

"Everything is production"(*Anti-Oedipus* 4): this is the claim that Deleuze and Guattari make in *Anti-Oedipus*. Their theme is that of connecting, producing, processing, making connections in order to make more connections in an endless cycle: "There is no such thing as either man or nature now, only a process that produces the one within the other and couples the machines together."(2) If the games we have looked so far are about anything, is it not process? This is not to say that process is all there is -- Deleuze and Guattari are adamant about that and express as much when they quote D.H. Lawrence saying, "The aim of any process is not the perpetuation of that process, but the completion thereof....The process should work to a completion not to some horror of intensification and extremity wherein the soul and boy ultimately perish."(5) Therefore process is subordinated to production, it becomes part of a production for which the goal is nothing more than more production. This is indeed how video games work: the player is not a Sisyphus rolling the stone up the hill only to have it roll back down as he reached the top; rather, the player in the role of Sisyphus reaches the top of the mountain every day only to have a new rock appear at the bottom the next morning. The

production is endless, yet each day our schizo-Sisyphus enjoys the pleasure of having reached the top of the hill. Production begets production and process begins anew each time.

In order for production to produce production, connections must be made. To Deleuze and Guattari, "desiring-machines are binary-machines...one machine is always coupled with another": desiring-machines, desiring more desire, also desire to be connected, and this is what accounts for pleasure in *Anti-Oedipus*. They deny in this claim that Freud's Oedipal configuration has anything to do with the pleasures of production:

> The satisfaction the handyman experiences when he pugs something into an electric socket or diverts a stream of water can scarcely be explained in terms of "playing mommy and daddy," or by the pleasure of violating a taboo. The rule of continually producing production, of grafting producing onto the product, is a characteristic of desiring-machines or of primary production: the production of production.(7)

And this is the place from which the idea of "plugging in" derives in this paper. That pleasure of the handyman is the same pleasure that the video game player receives in her continuous mirror stage experience of finding that her own movements elicit reaction from the screen. This experience is aided by a series of machines coupled together to form the brain-motherboard bridge: the hands manipulate the controller or the keyboard, the controller/keyboard relays the player's movements to the console, the console translates these motions into images, the screen projects the images, the player's eyes sees the screen and communicates the images to the brain, which in turn sends more commands to the hands; thus we see a closed circuit form.

The two governing nodes in this chain of desiring-machines are the image with which the player identifies -- the player-character -- and the player herself, who derives her pleasure from maintaining the circuit in her every manipulation of the PC. And the more complex the task, the greater the pleasure. Picking up an item elicits a small rush, the excitement of seeing virtual consequences for real-life actions, while completing a difficult mission or gaining a level becomes a dopamine-releasing, heart-pumping event. These actions connect directly into the production of narrative since, as I have described, every action has consequences -- even if they are minute -- for the narrative development of the game as a whole.

The Objects of Desire: Item Fetish

A classic symptom of the role-playing game is the obsessive quest for in-game collectibles. These constitute a range of objects such as experience points, -- points that help the character to "level up" and improve abilities and traits -- weapons, clothing, worthless knick-knacks and, of course, money. Games like *Fallout 3* and *Mass Effect* are rife with these things: experience points come from killing enemies and performing skilled tasks successfully; money may come from completing missions and inventory items -- that is, things that the player can carry around -- are sprinkled throughout any given location. Collecting these items becomes second nature to the player and can often lead to hoarding. Inventories fill up with multiple copies of the same weapon, skill points go unused until the opportune moment, money practically spills from every nook and cranny on the player character's body. Role-playing games are often about survival of the fittest and the fittest happen to be those carrying around the most stuff. Essentially, this means that everything that can be collected or compiled is

commodified, fetishized, transformed into an object of intense desire that seems to circulate in a discourse of perpetual lack.

In spite of this central lack, the collection of these various desire-objects throughout the game also becomes a formative experience. Every item the PC picks up or collects has the potential to differentiate it from a PC belonging to any other player of the same game. After enough play and enough collection, PCs diverge into separate regions of apparently individualized identity. A process of differentiation through which the player creates an in-game avatar with which it becomes increasingly easier to identify -- after all, the player must be able to know her own PC from that of another player; otherwise she might as well the other person: after all, how can she know herself from another if she and the other are capable of producing precisely the same object? With the above terms -- lack, commodity, product, fetish -- the most appropriate theorists for analyzing differentiation of PC identity in terms of collectibles seem to be Freud and Marx. Their works, "Fetishism" by Freud and *Capital* by Marx can help to illuminate this region of gameplay and the mechanics of its contribution to the player's immersion in the PC persona.

Freud: Fetish and Lack

Freud's fetish is constructed based on the principle of castration fear. It is the substitution of the penis created for the female that, through the male refusal "to take cognizance of the fact of his having perceived that a woman does not possess a penis,"(Freud 153) ostensibly reassures the male of the safety of his own organ. "[I]f a woman had been castrated, then his own possession of a penis was in danger"(ibid) and thus creates for the female penis "its substitute...[that] now inherits the interest which was formerly directed to its predecessor."(154)

This discourse of lack and substitution maps directly onto the fetishization of in-game collectibles in video games. Freud might say that, because the PC does not possess a male organ -- either because it is female or because of the doll-like nature of the PC model -- that the player is aware of, a cognitive dissonance forms between the player's self-construction and his representation on the screen. The obsession with collection that results is induced by a fetish formed with the goal of covering up or filling that space, for if the PC is afflicted by that lack, then the player's own security is threatened.

Of course, as with much of Freud's actual work, this explanation is troubled and flawed, particularly in its lack of account for the female player, who also takes part in the fetishizing mechanics of item collection. Fortunately, we can find an easy resolution through substitution: instead of the essential lack being that of the male organ, it is instead -- for both male and female players alike -- a lack of substance or form. The PC in the role-playing game is constructed as a kind of *tabula rasa*, a blank space on which the player can write anything. This is the case for all role-playing game PCs even if, as in *Mass Effect*, the game attempts to suggest that Shepard has some preexisting history (the player does, after all, get the opportunity to decide the contents of Shepard's past). The central absence of substance that the games present in their PCs indicates a vacuum that the player is compelled to fill because choosing to be represented by an empty doll would imply a disturbing act of self-effacement. As far as Freud is concerned, it is to this end that the player fills up the empty vessel of the PC with experience points and items: this constructive process employs identity and prevents any challenge to self-identification.

Marx: The Socializing Fetish

Marx, in contrast with Freud's idea of fetish as a function of internal identity configuration, sees it rather as a function of social positioning and identification of self in terms of production. In his discussion of the fetishism of commodities in *Capital*, Marx identifies the commodity as an object in which "the social character of men's labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour."(Marx 83) These commodities become the fetishized object, "the productions of the human brain [that] appear as independent beings endowed with life, [that enter] into relation both with one another and the human race."(ibid) The product of the individual becomes a marker for that individual's place in society, it "asserts itself as a part of the labour of society, only by direct means of the relations which the act of exchange establishes directly between the products, and indirectly, through them, between the producers." (84)

If the social relationship between producers is formed indirectly through the products of their labor, the differentiation of identity in society means producing a more unique product. While this is difficult in capitalistic society in general, it is much simpler in the role-playing adventure game genre. In this case, differentiation relies on complexity: the more items and accomplishments accounted for by a single PC, the more the laws of probability dictate that that PC will be different from any other PC. As a result, it behooves the player to collect more items and complete more tasks in more intricate ways. For the player, this becomes an outlet for individuation in a social context. She is able to assert her individuality by reassuring herself that no other person could have developed the same PC with the same qualities by the same process. To Marx, this would represent the attempt to attain individuality in the midst of the regulating and homogenizing effects of Capitalism on the consumer.

Anti-Oedipus: Synthesis

As I have shown, Freud and Marx account for two explanations of the fetish-object's involvement in the formation of a self-identification of the player with the PC. Through both external and internal operations, on the order of psychological and sociological, respectively, the player uses item collection to form a PC that is conducive to the player's mapping her own identity over the PC's structure. In summation, the formation of a PC that is individuated socially and empowered psychologically allows the player to feel comfortable in the act of immersing her identity in the self-representation that the PC offers. The employment of Marx and Freud above necessitates our return to *Anti-Oedipus*, the synthesis of the two theorists' work that promises a supplementary reading of the item-fetishizing process in role-playing games.

Deleuze and Guattari's discussion of desiring machines avoids focusing on the discourse of lack, focusing rather on the discourse of production and connection discussed above. Their analysis leads them to construct what they name "the body without organs," which they describe as "the unproductive, the sterile, the ungendered, the unconsumable."(D/G 8) The body without organs opposes the machines, detests them and sets itself up as their antithesis. This body in our discourse translates to the PC in its unformed state: before the wealth of phases of processing that the PC body undergoes, it is precisely like the body without organs. It is formless, purposeless, its existence is defined by non-existence. But then it begins to take on meaning as the player shapes it and attaches machines to it, making it more complex and giving it more dimensions. Just so with the body without organs, which "falls back on (*se rabat sur*) desiring production, attracts it, and appropriates for its own. The organ-machines now cling to the body without organs as though it were a fencer's padded jacket".(11) These desiring-machines -- these organ-machines -- desire connection to the body without organs: they form around it, enveloping

the stasis of the body with the eternal motion of perpetual production. The re-create the body without organ's, just as the player's decisions attach actual machines to the body of the PC: coded programs that render surfaces, that negotiate character attributes and their effects on gameplay. With each new machine, the PC body takes shape and purpose and gains context in the narrative production that it is to participate in, for which it is being created.

This procedure continues into the player's experience within the game's narrative proper, in which it intensifies and expands. The pleasure that the player feels in picking up an item in the game or gaining experience points is not the pleasure of filling a void in being or becoming whole; it is instead the pleasure of "plugging in," making new connections between binary machines and producing an effect on the surrounding world. The spot where the player "plugs into" her character a newly completed mission is the space where the character connects to the narrative node that initiates the mission, connects to the character that offers the mission, connects to the very space that that player occupies. The spaces in which the player makes these connections are reified, become meaningful and compile webs of meaning that tie the PC's, and therefore the player's, identity into the game world and the narrative field that envelops it.

Transclusion

Just as the player's engagement with video game narrative rests upon the process of being placed in a productive relation with the game itself, so the player's engagement in the identity of the PC stems from a cooperative production of identity. The player engages in an abstract dialogue with the game narrative and the PC, participates in this continuous dialogue for the sake of perpetuating the pleasure of being "plugged in." The player becomes invested in the narrative

process -- insofar as it is constructed around the player -- by experiencing agency in the character's creation and evolution.

The construction of the PC ultimately becomes an inductive process, a stitching-together of identity through a variety of in-game behaviors. This piecemeal configuration of the PC allows the player a very microscopic level of control in the process, opening up opportunities for inventing an identity that may be differentiated from a PC created by any other individual. By engaging in this kind of fine-tuning, the player therefore hopes to enjoy the pleasure of uncovering some intrinsic truth in herself, which this kind of differentiation promises.

As this chapter has shown, the above are the primary characteristics of the process of creating and developing a PC. Video games encourage the player's identification with the PC because the PC is the lens through which the games themselves are scrutinized: an appealing or engaging PC often makes the difference between a game in which players feel invested and immersed and a game with which the players cannot identify. The next chapter will investigate these lapses of identification more fully and attempt to show the means by which these ruptures are integrated into the immersive experience, or else the reasons for which they cannot be integrated.

Chapter 3: Dispelling the Illusion

Disruptions in Narrative Immersion

In spite of their complexity, video games remain incapable of creating perfectly immersive environments. The modern video game, for all of its capabilities is yet a far cry from the ontological crisis of a virtual reality like the imagined construct of *The Matrix* (2000). Every game possesses its own idiomatic flaws that break the illusion of immersion. Tom Bissell, in his book of video game reviews, discusses his own disappointment with certain details of video game narratives:

> My revolt was directed at a few things. The first was *Fallout 3*'s dialogue, some of it so appalling("Oh, James, we did it. A daughter. Our beautiful daughter") as to make Stephanie Meyer look like Ibsen. The second was *Fallout 3*'s addiction to trust-shattering storytelling redundancy, such as when your father announces, "I can't believe you're already ten," at what is clearly your tenth birthday party. The third, and least forgivable, was *Fallout 3*'s Jell-O-mold characterization.(Bissell 9-10)

Bissell clearly regards these practices as infractions against *Fallout 3*'s narrative integrity and, in his disdain, communicates the dissonance induced by these kinds of narrative disruptions.

Reactions of this nature are far from uncommon. Video game reviewers as a matter of course rate games using criteria such as intuitiveness of control layout, quality of storytelling and general aesthetics -- characteristics that, when disrupted or poorly executed, elicit outcry from reviewers and consumers alike. One particularly remarkable -- though not unprecedented -- case

is the 1991 title, *Zero Wing*. A game now infamous for its abysmally translated American release, *Zero Wing* sparked one of the first memes to appear on the internet. A line from the game's introduction, "All your base are belong to us," became the target for videos, remixes and various forms of mockery on pop culture websites. What prompted this reaction was not simply the fact that the translation was poor: rather, what players found unforgiveable was the irreconcilable narrative rupture imposed by the bungled translation.

The disruption of the illusion often originates in the interruption of the machine-circuit described above in the discussion of *Anti-Oedipus*: it is often the video game programmer's co-opting of the machine that momentarily revokes the player's agency. This occurs in a variety of ways, both intentional and inadvertent, and takes -- or threatens to take -- the player momentarily out of the role she has taken on by participating in the game. Aspects of a game that remove player agency can range from the selection of an incompetent translator (as in *Zero Wing*) to the use of loading screens and even stem from a simple choice of dialogue scripting that offends the aesthetic sensibilities of certain individuals (as in Bissell's case).

Narrative experiences that prevent utter immersion, that hold the player at arm's length from the text, fall into two realms. Experiences that can be negotiated and adapted to fit the immersive experience I will term integrable. These possess the qualities of producing some dissonance in the player's game experience, but nevertheless being capable of assimilation into the immersed consciousness. The alternative is the non-integrable: the experience that produces absolute dissonance that the player cannot reconcile. These effectively shatter the illusion that immersion bestows on the player, they are the "aesthetic pepto" that Bissell refers to, those unpleasant things that jar the player into unsettling awareness of being only a player and not a player-character. This chapter will examine various disruptive experiences, particularly those

present in *Fallout 3* and *Mass Effect*. Keep in mind, however, that categorization of these experiences as either integrable or non-integrable is subjective and that every individual will have a unique capacity for integration depending on personal aesthetics.

Janet Murray: Distancing the Player

In *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, Janet Murray examines the function of narrative in cyber-spaces, including video games, live-action role-playing (LARP) and mulit-user dungeons (MUD). In her discussion, Murray links the experience of narrative immersion to "instinctual arousal," a term used by D.W. Winnicott in child psychology, and which, in this context, relates to the sensation of interest in and adherence to the immersive environment. While Murray is not particularly exhaustive in her discussion of instinctual arousal, she refers to it as a form of trance and delineates the need for its control in the context of the participatory experience.

> [I]f a participatory immersive experience is not to be pornographic and if it is not to lead to frustration or to inappropriate explosion (like the verbal tirades, or flaming, in MUDs), then the participant's arousal must be carefully regulated. The trance should be made deeper and deeper without the emotions becoming hotter and hotter.(Murray 119)

According to Murray's view, the experience of a medium (film, literature, video game) must be carefully regulated in its relation to reality. The games utilize abstractions to this end, which "signal that something is happening that can only take place place [sic] in the viewer's or interactor's imagination."(123) These abstractions substitute threatening aspects of the virtual world, concepts or objects that rest too near the border of reality and thus "should not be too

enticing, scary, or real lest the immersive trance be broken."(119) Essentially, substitution becomes a small disruption in the immersive environment that effectively prevents a larger breach: the minute details are sacrificed for the sake of the whole.

By this logic, these virtual spaces are forced to skip over the details that come to close too Freud's "uncanny." The uncanny in Murray's analysis of virtual spaces seems to primarily include (much to Freud's enjoyment perhaps) sexuality, though the discussion briefly touches on violence, accompanied by an image of college students shouting numbers at one another in a hallway to simulate a fight. In spite of the somewhat humorous citations, Murray's opinion does contain value. The realm of the "too real" is of particular concern in this age, a time in which computer graphics and physics engines are expanding and evolving and an exponential rate, rendering images that are increasingly detailed and realistic with every new console generation or graphics card series. Though Murray's analysis of virtual sex substitution seems flawed in some ways -- the LARP groups examined may use substitutions for a wealth of reasons other than avoiding realism (also, in recent years, video game sexuality has become much more overt -- in many cases, it does appear that video game players favor games that avoid attempts at utter realism and include some form of abstraction, hence the over-the-top stylized violence of *Fallout 3* and the various forms of surrealism and burlesque that modern games often implement.

Of course, the subjects of analysis in video games that occupy the realm of excess are far more numerous than what Murray's analysis includes: the trance may also be broken by moments of the experience that are too campy, under-produced or bizarre. Nor does it seem that the avoidance of excess is always the motivation behind the small breaches of immersion in which video games engage. The decision to disrupt the illusion of realism may derive from the desire to fulfill an aesthetic convention, as shown, for example, in the cut-scenes used in *Mass Effect*.

It may also be the result of a decision to insert some kind of social commentary or to formulate a system of limited player-conditioning that intensifies the player's investment in a game. All of these purposes are legitimate and valuable in the strategic formulation of an immersive video game experience.

Third-Person Viewpoint

Easily the most integrable of disruptions in narrative immersion is the use of the disembodying third-person viewpoint, the primary camera angle in *Mass Effect* and a vehicle for stylistic poignancy in *Fallout 3*. The advantage of a first-person view over third-person with respect to player immersion strategies is readily apparent: a first-person view conveys an immediacy of game events, implying that the player is experiencing the game's narrative in the same mode that she experiences everyday life. The parallel offers an equation of biological life and virtual life that deepens the player's sense of immersion. But what of the third-person view? It offers less immediacy than first-person in *Mass Effect*, implying, when taken independently, that the player is actually experiencing a mediated narrative, one that she is viewing as a spectator rather than an overt participant. The disembodiment produced by the use of the third-person camera threatens to "other" the player-character, making it no more than a puppet for the player's use.

The camera positioning in *Mass Effect* often uses other techniques that intensify this danger of un-tethering the player's identification with the player-character. Pressing the button that directs Shepard to sprint forward prompts the camera to drop back a bit, exaggerating the drama of sprinting between cover positions in combat. When the player aims Shepard's weapon, the camera zooms in to help the player aim more accurately. Additionally, engaging other

characters in dialogue initiates a series of programmed camera angles that mimic traditional cinematic techniques, offering the player more dramatized conversations. All of these methods of adjusting the camera create a more cinematic experience at the cost of dividing the player-character's identity from the player's. When the player initiates a conversation, it is not entirely a conversation between the player and a character, as it would seem to be in *Fallout 3* -- a fact that becomes readily apparent in Shepard's autonomous dialogue scripting -- instead, it is a conversation between the character Shepard and another character.

While these methods produce an experience that contrasts with *Fallout 3*'s approach, they do not necessarily "lift the curtain" on the game and spoil the immersive illusion. Where *Fallout 3* seems to profess to deposit the player in her intellectual entirety into the narrative, *Mass Effect* refers in its approach to immersion achieved through live-action role-playing (LARP). Murray discusses LARP in terms of its interactivity and flexibility, identifying the players portraying events that "often have the immediacy of personal experience."(Murray 42) In LARP events, the players adhere to "specific character profiles [developed] by the game masters to guide the individual players without rigidly prescribing their actions." (117) Murray describes an MIT LARP club that uses Shakespearean plays as its source material:

> In a live-action game at MIT set in a world populated by characters based on Shakespeare's plays, Seth McGinnis, a graduating senior, had the secret identity of Puck from *Midsummer Night's Dream*. Puck was disguised from the other players as a member of a troupe of traveling actors who stage a performance of the Pyramus and Thisbe scene from *Midsummer Night's Dream*....Seth decided to take advantage of the

> confusion that occurs as everyone leaves the "theater" to use his fairy powers to create an illusory wall...(42)

Murray describes this event as having "the arresting presence of a spontaneous event" that, for the players, was "dramatically compelling"(43) The player's embodiment of Shepard is similarly capable of spontaneity: while the player, like the LARP-er, must operate within a predetermined set of criteria and acknowledge Shepard as having a separate identity, she nevertheless retains the agency of being able to "wear" the role of Shepard.

The maintenance or intensification of other means of agency in *Mass Effect* supplements the game's alternative means of identification. The player's ability to control dialogue options -- the prerogative to probe matters more intensively by requesting additional information or to cajole other characters with either high-flown heroism or old-fashioned bullying for instance -- heightens the player's sense of control and diminishes the disembodiment of dialogue cinematics. The third-person perspective, while disruptive in the visual identification aspect of the desiring-machine circuit, has the auxiliary effect of enhancing the sense of a player's control of the player-character. While in *Fallout 3*, the player is normally incapable of seeing the player-character's body, thus permitting the player to identify the effects of her control only in reference to the surrounding environment, the player of *Mass Effect* sees her use of the controller or keyboard manifest itself visibly in the camera angle and in the body of Commander Shepard. In this sense the third-person view allows for a different kind of pleasure by adding manipulation of a disembodied camera and the easily verifiable evidence of control in the player-characters body as aspects of agency.

Giving Up Control

Video games often resort to revoking player agency for short periods to various ends. Some of the reasons for this behavior are necessary for stylistic purposes: *Fallout 3* uses an action-pausing combat mechanic called VATS(Vault-Tec Assisted Targeting System) that allows the player to stop time momentarily and take aim at parts of an enemy's body. This is followed by a stylized third-person cinematic that shows the player firing in slow motion, displaying the action from various angles. *Mass Effect*, on the other hand, intermittently uses cut-scenes and cinematics for narrative development. While a number of events, such as an enemy attack on the enormous space-station named The Citadel, could be conveyed to the player -- who is in another system at the time -- with a simple message, the game chooses the more dramatic route and momentarily adjusts the narrative focalizor. These aspects of gameplay take away the player's agency to a degree: making her watch the player-character fire bullets autonomously or forcing her to look on as a battle is fought without her player-character's involvement can lend a certain sense of detachment from the game. On the other hand, these things often are necessary in order for the game to fulfill its role as entertainment. Stylized action and high drama are often expected of visual media, particularly role-playing video games in which moments such as those described above are relief from some of the more mundane moments of scavenging or fetch-and-bring missions. A number of video game reviews highlight the value of these momentary withdrawals from immersion: Kevin VanOrd's review of *Fallout 3* on the video game-related website, Gamespot.com claims that "the most satisfying and gory moments of battle are products of the Vault-Tec Assisted Targeting System."(VanOrd, "Fallout 3 Review")

A second noteworthy, agency-wrenching game operation is the loading screen, the interstitial region of video game activity. Over the years, games have developed different means

of handling the load screen, which is often necessary for the game to fully render an area that the player has just entered in order for activity in that area to run smoothly. *Assassin's Creed* (2007) included a load screen in which the player could pass the time manipulating the player-character within a "virtual" environment outside of the game world. *Fallout 3*'s load screens are more simplistic and show various game-related images accompanied by useful information about the game world. These load screens appear frequently, most commonly when the player walks through a door, as the next area must be loaded and rendered before the player may enter. *Fallout 3*'s handling of the load screen presents a challenge to the otherwise extremely immersive environment: it removes the player entirely from the narrative of the game and forces the player to sit for an unspecified amount of time (the screens may take seconds or minutes depending on the situation); nevertheless, the means of initiating the screens is clever. Presenting a load screen whenever the player opens a door invokes a version of Barthes's *tmesis* -- in literature, the semi-conscious act of skipping over lines and words. For the player, opening a door necessitates walking through that door. The load screen replaces that space that might be filled with an animation and uses it to prepare the next area while assuming the player will fill the empty space mentally -- which is precisely what the player does. Thus, when the player enters the new area, she is clearly stepping through the door, even though that act is not explicit. The transition feels natural in spite of the load screen and the player is able to continue on, more or less unperturbed. This kind of load screen, by such a reading, becomes an integrable disruption to the narrative experience.

Having determined as much, it seems counterintuitive to claim that the load screen implemented by the initial title of the *Mass Effect* series was non-integrable, yet according to popular opinion, such a pronouncement seems obligatory. *Mass Effect's* handling of the load

screen was characterized by the use of elevators: the player would walk Shepard and her companions into an elevator and the next section of the game would load as the lift transported the characters. These elevator rides would sometimes include brief dialogue or feature news reports piped in over an intercom, but the player was prevented from controlling Shepard's movement inside the elevator until the game had finished loading. The continuation of contact with Shepard, even in the midst of the game lading, unlike *Fallout 3*'s method, logically would seem to avoid disengaging the player, allowing the illusion of immersion to persist. In spite of this, the often interminable elevator rides this game mechanic produced, drove players to the point of public outcry. One video uploaded to Youtube depicts one particularly long elevator ride over which the poster superimposed a timer and dubbed a looped clip of canned elevator music("Mass Effect: Elevator Ride"). In spite of the fact that the wait amounted to only 53 seconds, the outrage at being forced to stare at Shepard for such an apparently long period is palpable in the player's acerbic approach.

The reaction to both of these approaches to load screens -- *Fallout 3*'s approach which was generally accepted without remark, and *Mass Effect*'s, which was met with hostility -- suggests some accuracy in Janet Murray's concept of controlling arousal. While *Fallout 3* relies on the players to instinctively fill in the narrative space that is blocked by the load screen, *Mass Effect* portrays the waiting times very literally, approaching the space of the "too real" that Murray claims threatens to break the "immersive trance."(Murray 119) Players seem to prefer to be offered suggestion, to receive "the abstractly represented action"(123) rather than play witness to the stultifying activities of everyday life. *Mass Effect 2* proved this fact when the developer, Bioware, significantly reduced the number of elevators and substituted abstract load

screens for extended elevator rides, resulting in expressions of gratitude from *Mass Effect* fans everywhere.

Death of a Player-Character

The above instances of disruption in immersion have all focused on a common theme: that of providing alternative forms of pleasure that diverge from immersion. The pleasure of entering through embodiment, navigating and unveiling the virtual world is not the only form of enjoyment offered in video games. As we have seen, games can also provide aesthetic and stylistic pleasures that offer substitutions for immersive pleasure at times: *Fallout 3* breaks the illusion of the first-person viewpoint to provide cinematic, stylized violence from which the player derives satisfaction on a number of different levels. The choice thus occurs between either attempting to preserve immersion rigidly or abandoning it for the sake of creating alternative pleasures. We see in the decisions to sacrifice small-scale aspects of immersion for the sake of preserving the whole a subordination to this process.

In 2009, From Software, Inc. released a game entitled *Demon's Souls*. This game is familiar as a traditional role-playing adventure with all of the sundry hallmarks of the genre: item collection, character customization and the use of experience points all recall the most traditional aspects of the average role-playing game, yet *Demon's Souls* is unique in its approach to gameplay. VanOrd, initiates his review of the game on Gamespot.com with the proclamation, "The Kingdom of Boletaria is an unforgiving place. Entering it means embracing a seemingly endless cycle of death and resurrection as you slowly tread through sullen swamps, scavenge dark caverns, and sneak between looming castle walls."(VanOrd, "Demon's Souls Review") VanOrd's statement identifies the most unique quality of *Demon's Souls*: its intentionally high

level of difficulty. The game makes no attempt to coddle players or to provide them with easy victories, instead ensuring that the player-character will have died countless times before the player is allowed to complete any given region. In spite of this, *Demon's Souls* engages players with incredible efficacy. VanOrd notes this unusual quality as well:

> Perhaps the game's greatest triumph, however, is that it takes qualities normally associated with frustration and discomfort--constant trial and error, slow progression, harsh enemies--and makes them virtues. It may have an unusual and unforgiving set of rules, but it stays true to them and, in the process, draws you in like few RPGs can. (ibid)

As we have seen in chapter 2, in most games, player-character death is a kind of punishment for the player's incompetence or inexperience: a loss of control that violently pulls the player out of the illusion and induces rupture. Although it prepares oppositions that help the player to identify more completely with the player-character, death becomes destabilizing and disorienting when it proliferates to such a degree as in *Demon's Souls*. The pleasure of uninterrupted immersion thus recedes from the player's grasp.

With the immersive pleasure thus out of the player's hands, a vacuum, which must be filled with alternative pleasure, is created. If the game that produces such intense levels of difficulty as *Demon's Souls* fails to fill the void, the challenge that the game forces on the player becomes non-integrable and the player, frustrated with countless fruitless attempts to succeed, will eventually choose to play an easier, more satisfying game. If, on the other hand, the game succeeds -- as *Demon's Souls* does -- to invent that alternative pleasure, then the experience is more integrable and more likely to encourage continued participation.

This conclusion is fairly easy to come by, yet there remains the question of which aspects of *Demon's Souls* are responsible for providing alternative pleasure sources. VanOrd hints at several qualities that present likely candidates for pleasure substitution: his list includes "meticulously crafted worlds," consistency in enemy behavior and combat events, and engaging multiplayer activities. His most interesting comment, though, touches on the wellspring of the game's alternative pleasure when he refers to the sensation of knowing that the prudent action would be to return to the Nexus (the game world's hub, where the player may buy and upgrade weapons) in order to spend accumulated souls (the game's currency, which are lost when the player-character dies), but instead feeling compelled to push onward:

> Yet even when you accumulate thousands upon thousands of valuable souls, and you know that the sensible thing to do is to return to the closest archstone and teleport back to the Nexus, your curiosity may push you onward. There always seems to be a terrific surprise lurking around the bend, in the way of awesome new enemies (a giant blob made up of flailing corpses), amazing environments (the thin suspended walkways hanging over Latria's murky swamp), and precious loot (stones used to upgrade your crossbow).(ibid)

The pleasure of the game, according to VanOrd, lies in the mystery of exploration. *Demon's Souls* offers pleasure in the form of building expectations in a process similar to variable ratio reward conditioning, allowing the player rewards for her perseverance at seemingly random intervals. Like the rat that repeatedly pushes the button expecting food, the player persists in participation in the hopes of being rewarded with some new breathtaking vista or rare item.

Though the example of *Demon's Souls* is an intensification of the immersive rupture, a case in which some aspect of the video games make investment or agency particularly difficult, the process of providing alternative pleasures remains constant for virtually any game that ignores or sacrifices some aspect of the immersive experience.

"Aesthetic Pepto"

With this, we come full circle to Bissell's rebellion against the aesthetic choices made by the developer of *Fallout 3* and his confusion at finding himself nevertheless absorbed in the experience of the game. In terms of the building blocks of video game narrative -- dialogue, branching storylines based on player decisions and general narrative structure -- video games often engage in flagrant infractions of the general aesthetic, resulting in stilted or cheesy conversations, awkward situations, totalitarian narrative constructions and disorienting plot development. *Fallout 3*'s transgressions include, notably, the penultimate of this list, a characteristic that Bissell does not speak about in any detail in his book. The binary, almost Manichaean morality that *Fallout 3* forces on its narrative often corners the player in situations that have no appealing outcome, such as in the Tenpenny Tower episode described above. As I have noted, the various scripted results of this episode point to the tyrannical power that the video game is often able to exert on its players, manipulating their options based on a set of rules to which only the game developer is privy. This diminishes the player's sense of agency relating to her control of the game's events and reminds her that the world of the game exists for her pleasure, but is not always tailored specifically to her own needs.

This knowledge presents itself in other situations, such as the unsatisfactory dialogue of which Bissell complains or poorly designed narrative mechanics that leave the player feeling

disoriented or disinterested. One particular instance of the latter arises in the 2010 Sega title, *Alpha Protocol*. This game takes an approach comparable with that of *Mass Effect*, presenting a third-person shooter role-playing game that offers narrative flexibility and numerous player-dependent options for story and development of a pre-existing character. The compelling aspect of the game, however, is where it fails. VanOrd reviews this game as well, and in his analysis of *Alpha Protocol*'s failings in its narrative construction, comments that "the game doesn't have much heart, which in turn makes it difficult to feel invested in its branching plot developments."(VanOrd, "Alpha Protocol Review") VanOrd cites several examples as well, describing how "One potentially emotional moment is treated so flippantly that it's almost insulting" and summarizes the game as "a robotic narrative that may stimulate your intellect but not your emotions." His analysis virtually speaks for itself: a game that offers poorly constructed narrative lacks the power to effectively invest a player, offering agency, but splitting it from the demand for player investment often involved in the provision of agency.

Comparing Bissell's reaction to *Fallout 3*'s aesthetic -- which was negative, but ultimately conceded the integrability of the narrative's perceived flaws -- with VanOrd's review of *Alpha Protocol* illustrates how purely vital narrative coherency becomes in the production of an immersive game. While *Fallout 3* failed to satisfy Bissell's (admittedly demanding) aesthetic in terms of storytelling minutiae, it nevertheless succeeded in immersing Bissell because of its ability to cohere agency and investment and create a relatable, comprehensible narrative; *Alpha Protocol*'s failure was rather more damning. Its inability to meet the modern standards of intelligible video game storytelling aesthetic in terms of organization and appeal disengaged investment from agency, allowing the player to take control, but within an unappealing and alienating narrative.

Conclusion

This examination of video game agency and investment has, for the most part, operated under the assumption that this media form is already widely accepted as a format of entertainment that exhibits qualities worth analyzing in the attempt to gain a deeper understanding of how individuals interact with the media. This, of course, is not necessarily the case: because of the novelty of the video game format, the artistic and narrative characteristics of games are often glossed over in favor of pointing out the psychological influence of their depictions of violence or their failures to convey narrative in manner that fulfills traditional expectations. I see no need to validate my analysis in the context of this paper, particularly in light of the fact that a multitude of scholars seem to share my interest in the video game as a new mode of storytelling; nevertheless, I feel the urge to address, in my concluding arguments, the questions that are particularly pertinent to an emerging narrative form, particularly one that seems to engage in rather unorthodox methods of presentation and audience engagement. Why are video games important as a new narrative media? What do they offer? How do they compare with more traditional media forms? These are the most important of these questions and, though this paper is unable to answer all of them fully, it seems that I must at least address them in part.

The analysis that I have engaged in throughout this paper evidences one of the most vital aspects of the video game as society is coming to understand it today: its methods of audience engagement diverge from preexisting media formats on a rather unprecedented level. The games being published today go to incredible lengths to layer complexity and agency in order to continually engage the player in both the pleasure of investigation and the pleasure of the literary experience. Coupled with the productive pleasure of character creation and narrative direction,

video games achieve levels of narrative co-productivity that reach far beyond the ken of practically any other media form. While film and literature often operate on a principle of engagement through passive immersion, video games encourage the player to actively immerse herself by constantly asking questions, interrogating NPCs and in-game objects, penetrating deeply into the game world to find answers to the whatever questions she is pleased to ask.

Video games provide an additional level of pleasure in their ability to almost unceasingly perpetuate the player's pleasure. While watching some films repeatedly may offer a certain kind of pleasure to the viewer, these films will never end differently than they did on the last viewing; video games -- like *Fallout 3* or *Mass Effect* -- on the other hand, may be revisited a hundred times without the player ever experiencing the same narrative. Of course, while this fact illustrates the malleability that only cybertexts are able to employ in their engagement of the player, it also shows one of the greatest difficulties in appraising the video game as an art-object. With such flexible narrative, the kinds of games represented by *Mass Effect* and *Fallout 3* must be viewed in terms of individual criteria rather than as complete units. The art is in the experience, as Tom Bissell seems to suggest in some of his examinations, and the experience by its nature resists the objectivity of modern criticism.

If I were to summarize, video games are important because they represent a new order of thought; not necessarily a better order, but certainly one that is new to modern media and extremely innovative. Video games have developed at an astonishing rate and will continue to do so into the foreseeable future. In providing high levels of agency and by "plugging" the player into the narrative through semiotic manipulation, these games explore alternative routes for engaging their audiences, thereby promising a degree of immersion that is as great, if not greater, than the level of immersion often present in film, literature and the other various forms

of traditional media. By offering the player new forms of enjoyment in the experience of narrative, they open up new avenues of mediated experiences that may, one day, refract onto the more traditional forms and help them evolve into even newer media forms. For now, the greatest gift video games have to offer us is new eyes with which to see, and vivid, immersive and unique worlds in which we might use those eyes.

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Fallout 3 (2008)

Mass Effect (2007)

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Pong (1972)

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Images

fig 1.1: http://chrisbaer.net/mp/2008/11/12/perfect-start-syndrome/

fig 2.1: http://www.gamesradar.com/fallout-new-vegas-mega-primer-a-brief-history-of-fallout-in-two-universes/?page=3

fig 2.2: http://www.gamesradar.com/fallout-new-vegas-mega-primer-a-brief-history-of-fallout-in-two-universes/?page=3

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by Jeffrey Mangels

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