

UNMASKING THE PLAYER:
EXTENDED FICTION IN GAME DESIGN

by

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ABSTRACT

This paper's purpose is threefold: first, to analyze video games that employ extended fiction story telling game design techniques. Secondly, to parse out these techniques from their respective games in order find what design philosophies can be gleaned from these games and how they can and cannot be replicated. Finally, to argue that the metanarrative critiques that these games offer to the video game medium, specifically their critique of player relations to the game, are best executed using these extended fiction techniques. I will do this through analysis of multiple games in multiple genres, focusing on the extended fiction elements the games have, the effects these games have on players, and the critique they offer. Much of this analysis will be done through the lens of what is and isn't diegetic in the realm of the respective games, as it provides a thorough way to determine what elements are specifically involved in the extended fiction of the game and how they're used.

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A Note:

This Thesis discusses many video game narratives in detail. There will be thorough description for the key points in the plot of many video games throughout, so if you wish to avoid spoilers for any of the following games, you may wish to skip the relevant sections or come back to the paper after completing the games. Games discussed in the paper that are not mentioned in this list do not discuss major plot points.

❖ TO YOU WHO I'VE NEVER MET

➤ *Earthbound (Mother 2)*

❖ OTHER SIDE OF THE SCREEN

➤ *ICEY*

❖ JOLLY COOPERATION

➤ *Dark Souls*

❖ LET ME READ YOUR MIND

➤ *Metal Gear Solid*

➤ *Emily Is Away*

❖ FLOWERS FOR M[A]CHINES

➤ *Life Is Strange*

➤ *Manhunt*

➤ *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*

❖ OUR CHOICES MAKE US

➤ *Hotline Miami*

➤ *Spec Ops: The Line*

➤ *Bioshock*

INTRODUCTION

In any story, a diegetic element is one that the characters of the fiction are aware of. The simplest example is music in a movie; if there is a radio playing music in a scene, that music is diegetic. If a musical soundtrack plays over a scene but is something the characters cannot hear, it is non-diegetic. The border between the diegetic and non-diegetic is most commonly referred to as “the fourth wall” (Webster), in reference to the imaginary fourth wall of a play set, where the sides and back of a room are fully represented on the theater stage, but the opening through which the audience observes the events of the play is an imaginary barrier. This barrier isn’t just a literal completion of the four walls in a traditional room of a building, but also a metaphorical separation of reality from fiction, quarantining them from each other to prevent interference.

The problem with this boundary is that it can’t fully encompass the medium of video games. Video games, at their very essence, are an interactive medium. They require some breach of the fourth wall for them to function, as the game could not proceed to tell its story without a player’s input. In his article “A Circular Wall? Reformulating the Fourth Wall for Video Games”, Steven Conway offers this criticism of the term:

... whilst the notion of the fourth wall finds itself within a welcoming habitat amongst media such as books, television and cinema, the physical interaction demanded by computer games creates a completely different relationship between product and audience. (Conway)

The Article *Press the 'Action' Button, Snake! The Art of Self-Reference in Video Games* expands this concept further. The author makes a similar argument against the use of the term “breaking the fourth wall” in discussing video games;

The self-referential aspects of games like *Zork*, *Sonic the Hedgehog*, *Eternal Darkness*, and *Metal Gear Solid* are examples of what Rune Klevjer refers to as "extended fiction," the act of pushing out boundaries of make-believe to include certain aspects of the user's reality. Because games are complex artifacts that function on different levels of reality simultaneously, they are not "breaking" anything by sliding between the different levels of reality already at play. They are simply making use of the unique affordances of the video game medium and trusting the player to be able to parse the different levels of reality into a coherent whole.

(Weise)

Even as such, most video games still have traditional lines in the sand of what is considered diegetic and non-diegetic. Those items that are diegetic are traditionally inside the bounds of the magic circle¹, which is “...generally limited to the fictional world generated between the game console/PC program and the player” (Conway). However, there exists a set of games that break beyond these bounds, what Conway refers to as “an extension of the magic circle”; games that take those items that were traditionally non-diegetic and thrust them into the realm of the diegetic, or other games that obscure or imply the diegetic nature of some elements of the game, such as whether or not the player

¹ A term coined by Dutch writer Johan Huizinga, referring to the artificial circle that is drawn around an arena of play.

is diegetic. Elements of a game that use extended fiction create intensely engaging gameplay through the methods they employ around these elements. They can provide not only enthralling gameplay experiences, but also metanarrative² self-critique of the medium of video games that is hard to imagine possible without these methods.

This thesis will offer up examples and analysis of some of games that use extended fiction, provide a guide to the mechanical design and narrative patterns used to perform these techniques, and an explanation of why the medium of video games is uniquely suited to execute these critical narrative techniques. A guide on how to execute any sort of metanarrative critique would be pointless, as any worthwhile execution of extended fiction will require a somewhat unique approach; instead this thesis will recognize patterns and techniques used to create extended fictions, what effects those techniques have, and what critiques have been previously offered on those techniques, in order to help understand extended fiction techniques in video games so they can be further built upon in future.

TO YOU WHO I'VE NEVER MET

The *Mother* series is an example of a collection of games that are not afraid of acknowledging the virtual nature of their existence. In *Earthbound* (released as *Mother 2* in Japan) for the Super Nintendo Entertainment System, the player character (a child) is confronted by two adult policeman who comment “At times like this, kids like you should be playing Nintendo games” (*Earthbound*). Quirky, self-aware jokes like this

² Metanarrative is a “fiction that comments upon its own artificiality” (Metanarrative). Used in video games, metanarrative is often used for self-critique of the interactions between game and player.

abound in the *Mother* games, but *Earthbound* executes a much more profound extended fiction as well.

The player has a significant amount of control in *Earthbound*. *Earthbound* is a game in the traditional JRPG³ style, which is a style of design that usually allows the player to control a party of characters and command where they go, what they do, who and how they fight, and so on. Not only does the player have a controlling role in accomplishing set gameplay goals, but they control multiple characters from a top-down perspective—a perspective that could be seen as akin to the perspective of a god viewing and controlling mortals from above. Godlike control of a world is a regular occurrence in video games, especially JRPG games like the *Mother* series; in fact, a “God Game” is a separate, well-defined subgenre in which the player controls an entire virtual world and its inhabitants from above. *Earthbound* is not considered a God Game, but the player’s perspective of the world draws many parallels to that of a god over a digital realm.

Further in line with the perspective of a benevolent deity, *Earthbound* is a game that pushes the player to care for its denizens. The game clocks in at an average playtime of 28-36 hours (HLTB), so the player is spending nearly a full work week interacting with the world from above and speaking to its quirky inhabitants. These interactions with the denizens of *Earthbound* prompts the player into a caring relationship with them that builds throughout the game. In particular, the player comes to care for the player-controlled characters: Ness, Paula, Jeff, and Poo, the characters whose interactions they

³ JRPG is an acronym for Japanese Role-Playing Game (JRPG), a stylistic sub-genre of role-playing video games that follows a school of game design originating and traditionally followed in Japan.

specifically control. In any game, the characters that a player controls are distinctly embodied and empathized with, as Peter Bayliss states in *Beings in the Game World*:

Over time the player will become better aware of what the capabilities and limitations of their avatar are, and thus have a better understanding of the possibilities offered by their avatar to act within the game-world... the player comes to “think like a computer” by internalizing the logic and rules of the game through the experience of embodying their avatar, which is then reflected in their conduct during the course of play. (Bayliss)

This process of thinking like a computer could be more aptly stated as thinking in the game world’s terms. The more time a player spends with a game, the more they come to internalize the games ruleset, making it more natural for them to understand the world of the game and thus allowing them to better empathize with the characters and how those characters interact with the world.

Games quite often encourage the player to empathize with and care for the characters within the game, giving the player tasks to help others and showing meaningful influence on those characters’ lives through the actions directed by the player. In describing *Little King’s Story*, Murphy and Zagal state:

Little King’s Story encourages the player to recognize, relate to, and ultimately care about the citizens of his kingdom... If the player takes the time to interact with the citizens, he will discover that each of these non-player characters has his own personality and story... Over the course of the game, the player becomes familiar with the citizens that he spends

more time with, observing them interact with each other and with the player's avatar. All of these things serve to encourage the player to care about the well-being of the citizenry of his kingdom...(Zagal)

All of this storytelling effort is dedicated to bringing the player to feel a responsibility for the denizens of the digital realm. As a game about saving the world from invasion, it's critically important to *Earthbound* that the player cares about saving the world of the game, or else they will be narratively disinterested and ultimately have an inferior experience with the game. When the player is influenced to feel a sense of duty to the characters of the world, they're more likely to truly engage with the game and its themes, and be motivated to accomplish the goals of the characters. However, this sense of responsibility is traditionally detached from the actual game in diegetic terms. The player, their responsibility, and their control are traditionally non-diegetic parts of the game narrative. A player, while they may come to care about and feel responsible for the game world, isn't explicitly acknowledged as responsible for the game's world, nor is their sentiment for the characters of the game addressed.

Earthbound challenged those traditions at its iconic climax.

At the end of *Earthbound*, there is a fight to save the characters world from destruction. Four children are pitted against Giygas, the "Embodiment of evil, Universal Cosmic Destroyer" (Giygas). Right before the fight begins, one of the main characters, Paula, turns towards the screen, and addresses the player by name. The player had initially entered their name at the very start of the game for no discernable reason, but at

this point, one of the game's characters directly addresses the player, pleading with them for help (Figure 1).

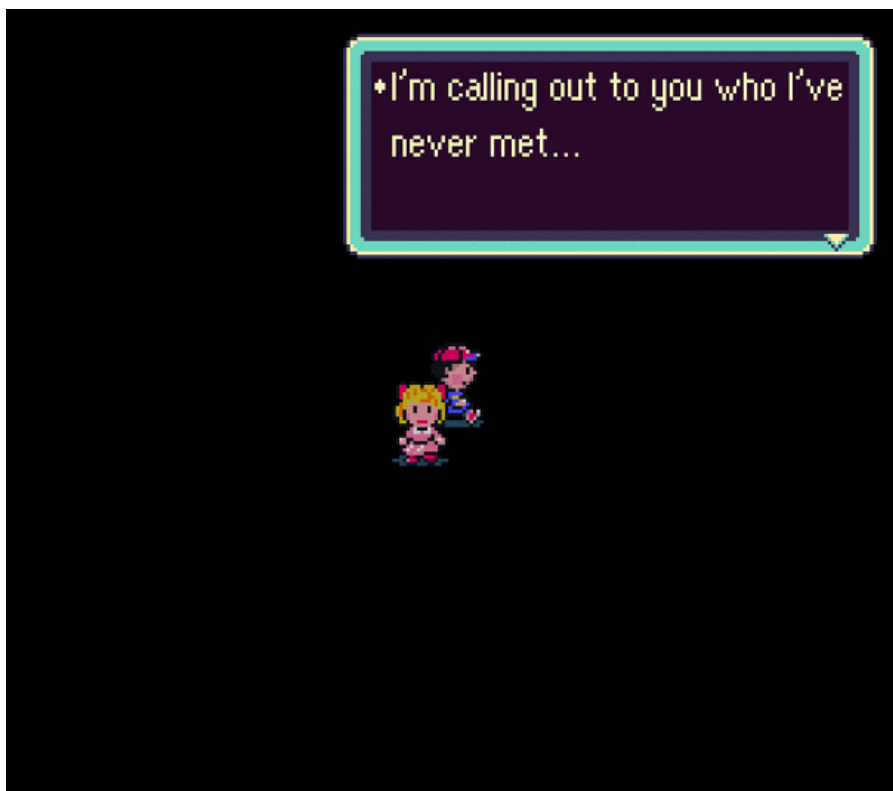


Figure 1, Screenshot from Earthbound

"I'm calling out to you who I've never met... I'm calling our friend who we've never met... (player name)! (player name)! We need your help! I am Paula and I am with another friend, Ness... We are trying to contact you..."
(Earthbound)

The player is suddenly pulled, not from the immersion of the game world, but into a diegetic role in the game world. The responsibility and level of control in guiding these children and keeping them safe is in this moment diegetically acknowledged, a move that drastically heightens the sense of duty the player feels to help these characters because they now express awareness of the player's ability to help them. In a game where the player assumed they were non-diegetic, an invisible god controlling the actions of smaller

beings, their anonymity and stakes-free position outside of the game world is now challenged; if they fail, the game will explicitly acknowledge that they, the player, failed, instead of attributing the failures to the game's protagonists. In a dire moment, the game is breaking down all the barriers it can in a desperate plea for a savior. The game has challenged the player's detached involvement and in doing so, given them a much heftier emotional stake in the affairs of the game, its people, and its world. This moment provides an incredible breakdown of barriers between game and player. As Jeremy Parish described it,

If you're not expecting it, this turn of events is quite stunning. Taken in the context of the final showdown with the mighty Giygas, set in an unsettling, surreal dreamscape, it feels almost like the game itself is breaking down. It's perhaps the most clever and powerful moment in a clever and powerful game. (Parish)

This is the penultimate example of explicitly acknowledging the player's role in a game where they exhibit so much control. The game's characters acknowledge the player as a diegetic presence with control over them, and that they, as fictional, virtual beings, rely on the player to survive and save their virtual world. The surrealistic imagery of the game itself breaking down conveys that the player is not saving a fictional world, it's saving the entire game as a virtual entity, from an attack on the inside. It places an incredible amount of responsibility on the player's shoulders; whether or not these characters or their world exist, the burden of protecting them has suddenly been very directly, diegetically placed on the shoulders of the player.

This is a pronounced example of a dynamically diegetic element in a game. The execution of this design principle is simple; the player is led to assume that the game's components fulfill traditionally diegetic roles: the music and menus in the game are non-diegetic, the characters and world are diegetic, the player is non-diegetic as well as the reality of the game being a piece of software, etc. But at a climactic moment, a non-diegetic element is folded into the game to become diegetic. Then that element, be it the controls, the game console, or the player, becomes a key part of the story. The story is no longer just about the written plotline; the story is about the gameplay, about interactivity, about the very nature of interacting with a digital realm. The story truly embraces the unique interactive aspect of video games and suits its narrative to that aspect, critiquing this aspect in any way the author intends. The developer creates a scenario for the story to unfold in, but the actions the player takes write the story one button press at a time.

What this subversion of diegetic tradition does in *Earthbound* is nothing short of extraordinary. In a time of desperate need, the game's characters call on every last hope, reaching beyond the boundaries of what the player believed possible, both acknowledging their empowerment and sobering them at the same time. It heightens the drama of the situation in a surprising way, and truly, diegetically invests the player in the fate of a world not their own, making the success of victory that comes at the end all the more personal.

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE SCREEN

Video games, as an art form, are always a collaborative effort between at least 2 parties: the developer⁴, and the player. Without the developer, be it a single person or a 300-employee studio, the game wouldn't exist. Without the player, the game couldn't perform as a piece of art. This is an endlessly fascinating relationship caused by the interactive nature of the medium. Within this collaboration, there are many non-diegetic positions the developer can traditionally fulfill: the storyteller, the toymaker, the referee, the dungeon master, etc. But on occasion, developers choose to engage in a diegetic relationship with the player, morphing the friendly relationship from artist to audience to one of rivalry and contention. This is another example of folding traditionally non-diegetic elements, in this case the developer, into the diegetic realm of the game.

The idea of the developer being the rival to the player, of being in an antagonistic relationship with the player, is a fascinating but common one. John "TotalBiscuit" Bain stated his view of single player games as this: "I view single player games as competitive... I view it as the notion of competing with the developer's challenges, the things that the developer has prepared for me." (Bain)

At its most basic, the purpose of a game is to create a set of challenges for the players entertainment, and then give them a toolkit of actions that, if performed in some correct sequence, will result in overcoming the challenge. In some games there is only one way to complete a challenge; other games offer multiple different strategies a player can execute to complete a given challenge. This notion hearkens back to the traditional table top role-playing game model, with a "Game Master" or "Dungeon Master" who is

⁴ A game "developer" is a common term for anyone who works on the creation of a video game.

“the person who organizes or directs the story and play in a role-playing game” (Game Master) and players who compete against the challenges the game master has set up for them. Most players opt to tackle the challenges head on through traditional in game mechanics, but some players find much more enjoyment in subverting the creator’s plans by pushing the limits of the presented ruleset for a given game. In *Creative Player Actions in FPS Online Video Games*, the author discusses these kinds of behaviors as “creative player actions” and “creative innovations”;

Play is not just "playing the game," but "playing with the rules of the game" and is best shown in the diversity of talk, the creative uses of such talk and player behavior within the game, plus the modifications of game technical features... as in any human performance, creativity of execution is the norm... This creative subversion of game rules occurs consistently in the many debates over "cheating" within the game.... what is consistent is the bending of conventional game rules, as we have seen in this example, which can easily be viewed as a creative innovation within the game. (Wright)

In some games players can, through experimentation with the toolbox they are given, find a unique combination of in-game actions to perform that went totally unpredicted by the game’s designer. These creative player actions often undercut the intended skill check⁵ and associated challenge the game was meant to provide. Players who are likely to engage in creative player actions typically enjoy this breaking of rules.

⁵ A skill check is a term derived from tabletop RPG’s that refers to testing the abilities of a player.

These players are referred to as “Transgressive Players” (Aarseth), and the psychological motivations of transgressive players are explained by a section of *Progress in Reversal Theory*;

For example, conforming to the rules and rituals of some club that one is honored to be a member of can be a pleasure in itself, as can defying the rules of some petty authority or bureaucracy which appears to be restricting one’s activities unnecessarily. Conversely, failure to conform in the conformist state or failure to defy in the negative state will both contribute some degree of displeasure to the overall hedonic tone at the time in question. (Cowles)

One of the most famous (and comedic) examples of creative player actions can be found in *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*. The player can, at any point in the game, pick up and move around items within the game world and drop them wherever they want. The player can also, at any time, attempt to steal items from NPCs in the game. If they are caught doing so by an NPC, they are then confronted and punished for their attempted



Figure 2, Screenshot from *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*

theft. But, if the player places a pot or basket over the head of all the present NPCs, their line of sight is totally cut off and they cannot detect the player stealing items from them. This leads to humorous instances where the transgressive player is casually robbing a merchant, while the merchant stands obliviously, acting normally with a kettle covering his head (Figure 2). This also removes all risk and challenge from the situation, undermining the developers intended challenge and risk/reward system involved with stealing.

When a transgressive player can execute creative player actions, the result tends to break the immersion of the player, reminding them of the artificiality of the digital realm they're interacting with. These situations draw the player out of the experience, pulling them from full immersion in a well simulated world to a non-immersed state with an obviously digital simulation. Traditionally these exploits are seen as disruptions to the game's intended narrative, as they subvert the presentation of conflict intended to give plot and tone to the world the player interacts with. Indeed, the interactive nature of video games themselves provides difficulty in explicitly conveying narratives, as stated in *A Case Study in the Design of Interactive Narrative: The Subversion of Narrative*;

“The difficulty is that the exercise of interactive choice and a conscious volition can disrupt the immersion into narrative and story. In comparison to reading a book or watching a movie, some disruption of the narrative experience is inevitable. (Bizzocchi)

However, in some games, especially those in which the developer assumes a diegetic competitive role towards the player, the opportunities for creative player actions are often a bait-and-switch and create more immersion for already defiant players who

attempt them. Players think they've found a loophole, a way to exploit the game that the developer didn't consider, but it's actually a trap laid by the developer to then return fire on the player for trying to circumvent the game's logic. The developer has thought through the exploits the player might try and placed faux opportunities at likely points to bedevil them. They really aren't catching the transgressive players acting unpredictably; they're forming outcomes around things they anticipate the transgressive player to do, things the player might think are unpredictable. They're folding what would usually be considered as non-diegetic exploits of the ruleset of the game into a diegetic position in the narrative. These exploits become diegetic maneuvers of the player against a diegetic game master, expanding the game narrative beyond the traditional on-screen plot elements into a player/dungeon master competitive narrative around game rule experimentation.

One of the best games that successfully exemplifies this relationship is *ICEY*. *ICEY* is a side scrolling brawler that relies on a very simple directional arrow system and a guiding narrator to direct the player where to go. The entire game can be played following the arrow, fighting enemies and experiencing the story of the titular main character in the "correct" way. The player can also choose to deviate from the arrows and explore at any time, and the game will acknowledge the transgressive player's "disobedience". The game's narrator will make sarcastic, disparaging comments about the player, and the game will lead the player to weird secrets and present a wholly different experience. These "unintended paths" lead the player to unfinished levels, rooms with videos of prototype versions of the game, and continuous dialogue from the narrator about how much harder video game players make his life because of their

insistence on testing the boundaries of the game instead of just playing it like it was meant to be played. The developer of *ICEY* designed the game specifically to tempt players into veering off the intended path so he could express his frustration with this habit players have in regular games, creating a metanarrative around this concept about the rigors of game development with an uncooperative audience. The game's description on Steam states:

ICEY is a Meta game in disguise. The narrator will constantly urge you in one direction, but you must ask, "Why? Why am I following his directions? Why can't I learn the truth about this world and *ICEY*'s purpose here?" Fight against his tyranny and uncover what's really going on for yourself! (Buy *ICEY*)

This purposefully challenges players to rebel against the game, its narrator, and ultimately, its developer, pushing the normal player to become transgressive. Narrators in games and other mediums are often perceived as the author themselves, being that "The narrator is always either a character who narrates or the author" (Alber). *ICEY*'s narrator is the game's lead developer. "Fight against his tyranny" is not a call to fight against the tyranny of the voice the player is hearing, but the tyranny of the game, the tyranny of the rules the developer has set in place. It is a call to fight the rules and systems the developer prepared, the purposeful design and well-planned challenges they laid out, the carefully prepared story they penned for the player's enjoyment. The object of the player's crusade becomes the intent to try overturning the original design and taking control of the game's world.

This very explicitly brings the game's player and developer into a diegetic struggle for control. The narrative stops being about the adventures of the protagonist characters in the game and becomes a faux competition between developer and player, with the player defiantly competing against the developer they believe is antagonizing them, and the developer playing the part of the authoritative opposing force to actively encourage the player to explore and discover. This clever design philosophy rewards players not with just the traditional rewards inherent to overcoming a challenge in a game through intended actions, but a more intense reward that comes with the need for creative innovations through gameplay. As stated by Bain, "One of the things I really enjoy about this game is trying to outsmart the developer... and the discovery that ...the developer has outsmarted me, not the other way around. That is a very joyful feeling indeed" (Bain). The experience of being rewarded for cleverness and exploration is one that doesn't rely on fast reflexes or clever strategy, but on ingenuity. The enjoyment comes not from quick combos or good aim, but in being acknowledged as thoughtful enough to find hidden rewards and think independently of developer hand holding. In *ICEY*, the sarcastic insults prompted by disobedience are a thinly veiled reward to the player, an acknowledgement of respect from the developer to the player for uncovering the secrets of the game.

Furthermore, the creator of *ICEY* offers a critique to players who do dig far enough into his game; knowing that players who persist in creative gameplay actions are most likely ones who have done so before and will do so again, he offers up a frustrated dialogue about how the audience will disparage a game that they can find a way to exploit.

In reality, it's very difficult to make a game, and it's very easy for problems like this to appear... Unknowingly, 10 years flew by in the blink of an eye. With all the effort I spent, I think a few scattered bugs or missing features are entirely acceptable... Games are about entertainment. Don't place too much value on a few mishaps here and there. ("Icely")

What the developer does here is masterful; he presents situations in which he pretends as if the player has found a bug or exploit in the game, but really, it's an intended experience in the game to push players who do find one of these situations into a clearer understanding of the frustrations experienced by game developers. It takes what is usually a peak behind a curtain into a disenchanting, immersion-ruining scene, and turns it into an immersive, personal moment between developer and player.

The execution of this design technique is dissectible into three parts. First, the game must present a "correct" or "intended" way of playing the game. Second, the game must have opportunity, whether explicitly encouraged or implicit, to stray from the "intended" route through the game. It is important to note that this encouragement can also take form in reverse psychology, and more often than not does, for purposes of comedic entertainment. Finally, the game must provide a feedback system of some kind, whether explicitly positive rewards (such as points or achievements) or sardonic rewards, such as annoyed responses from characters or the narrator, to encourage the player to keep playing and pushing boundaries.

Successful execution of this technique often involves layered subversions of video game tropes, in order to lead players into situations they expect to be able to exploit. The final step also requires acknowledgement of the player and/or developer as diegetic

forces in the narrative. This provides motivation and immersion to the player in the experience, changing their creative player actions into the diegetic solutions in a game of wits against the developer, instead of breaking their immersion through unintended creative player actions. While diegetic adjustment is not explicitly required to execute this kind of intended creative player action focused game design, the purpose it serves in maintaining immersion is key to keeping players invested in a game with any sort of intentional narrative.

My personal experiences with this technique revolve around my game *A Very Bad Clock Game*, a game that I developed in my alternative game development class. The primary objective of the game is to drop a ball onto the hands of a real time clock in order to shepherd it into the goal. The game is intensely not fun; the way I provided motivation to the player was through directly antagonizing them. I informed them that the game wasn't fun or impressive in any way, that it's a waste of their time, etc. This provided an interesting conflict in the game; not between the player and the rather tedious puzzles, but between the player and the developer (me) in who had the most patience. I found it best to approach the player early with the antagonistic relationship, since the game is intentionally encouraging its players to give up before they even find the extended fiction elements of the game.

Very few video games, or mediums of art in general, diegetically acknowledge the people who created them or their audiences. And even fewer of those games acknowledge in any way those who push at the limits of the software, finding their own creative ways of overcoming challenges. Games that not only acknowledge these methods of gameplay but are designed specifically to reward this type of play, provide

unique narratives in the realm of games. Rather than just preventing transgressive player actions from breaking game systems, a task that consumes millions of assurance and bug fixing hours a year, the developers instead anticipate these actions and, in surprisingly good spirits, playfully put the players in their place. The games that account for a mass amount of gameplay variance with sarcastic commentary are perhaps the most honest expressions of the frustrations of the game development process that we have, and a playful acknowledgement of the creativity of players.

JOLLY COOPERATION

The *Souls* series of games, consisting of *Demon's Souls* and the *Dark Souls* trilogy, have become synonymous with grim worlds and grueling difficulty. The series takes place in harsh medieval worlds, once grand kingdoms of men now fallen, becoming a land of decrepit castles and grisly monsters. The tone of the *Souls* games also evokes feelings of intense loneliness, best described by author Matt Sam;

The emphasis on loneliness is important to create an atmosphere of dread and despair in Lordran. The world is meant to encompass a truly dark and ugly air, as detailed by nearly every location and every character in the game. In fact, it's not even just the player that's alone: it's everyone. In the Tomb of the Giants, Nito is alone, in the Painted World of Ariamis, Priscilla is alone, at the Kiln of the First Flame, Gwyn is alone. Everyone in Dark Souls is alone. (Sam)

Even the player-controlled heroes at the start of the game are warped undead, hideous figures with wrinkled yellow skin. The entire tone of the world is one of brutality and sorrow, with the gameplay being no exception.

The gameplay is tonally consistent with these themes in that the second to second gameplay is especially ruthless; one mistake can lead to quick death, so much so that the “You Died” screen from *Dark Souls* has become infamous in gaming culture (Dark Souls / Memes). The games are even more difficult due to the lack of available information. After the game’s tutorial, where to go, what to do, and how to progress are all unexplained and intentionally obfuscated. The player doesn’t have so much as a map to show them around the world; the entirety of this world and its terrifying daemons must be conquered with almost no presented information on how to do so. For most any other game, these would be unforgivable flaws. Conveying information to players so that they can feel competent and progress is key to retaining players and providing a good gameplay experience. Games cater to the player, making it convenient for them to enjoy the core gameplay loop of the game, where the challenge traditionally resides. The obtuseness of the *Dark Souls* games makes them incredibly difficult to jump into and play.

Through combining themes of loneliness with the merciless nature of the player’s interaction with the world, the creators of the game create great need within the player for direction. Through the other themes of the game, they also encourage that cooperation, in a fascinating way that maintains their fiction while implying the creator’s intent. *Dark Souls* lore specifies that time in these games does not necessarily pass in a linear fashion. Best described by the character Solaire in the game:

“We are amidst strange beings, in a strange land.

The flow of time itself is convoluted, with heroes’ centuries old phasing in and out.

The very fabric wavers, and relations shift and obscure.

There's no telling how much longer your world and mine will remain in contact.

But, use this, to summon one another as spirits, cross the gaps between the worlds, and engage in jolly co-operation!

– Solaire of Astora (Dark Souls)

This dialogue reveals that, in the realm of the game of the game, there are other diegetic heroes who have already completed the quest you are embarking on, that there are heroes in other variants of this world pursuing the same goals as you, and that there will be heroes after you, hoping to triumph over the same evil. In fact, players can leave messages in their world that will appear in another player’s world, and even summon spiritual remnants of other players, whether to learn of their activity or summon them for aid. The game very explicitly pushes the player towards collaboration, whether through observation or active cooperation, with other human player characters. This is described in *No Mastery Without Mystery*;

While playing Dark Souls, the player frequently encounters fleeting spectral presences (Fig 3). Ghostly fellow travelers keeping her company as she rests at a bonfire, adventurers engaging in combat against

unseen enemies, warriors dying in battle: all appear momentarily before fading away from view. A diegetic justification is offered for this — early in the game, a non-player-character tells the player that, in Lordran, “the flow of time itself is convoluted, with heroes’ centuries old phasing in and out. The very fabric wavers, and relations shift and obscure... However, the full aesthetic effect of these presences is achieved once the player realizes the identity of these spectral presences: that is, that they are in fact other players, captured and re-presented in real-time as they engage in their own simultaneous playing of Dark Souls wherever (and whoever) they might be in the world. The ghostly figures travel paths different to the ones the player takes; they wear armor and wield weapons the player might not yet have discovered; they deploy techniques the player might not yet have learnt, or even known were possible. In short, they shadow the player’s own playing of Dark Souls with an intimation of all the “paths not taken,” revealing the vast space of possibility that is both hinted at and, simultaneously, closed off by the player’s activation of a single playing-out of the game. (Vella)

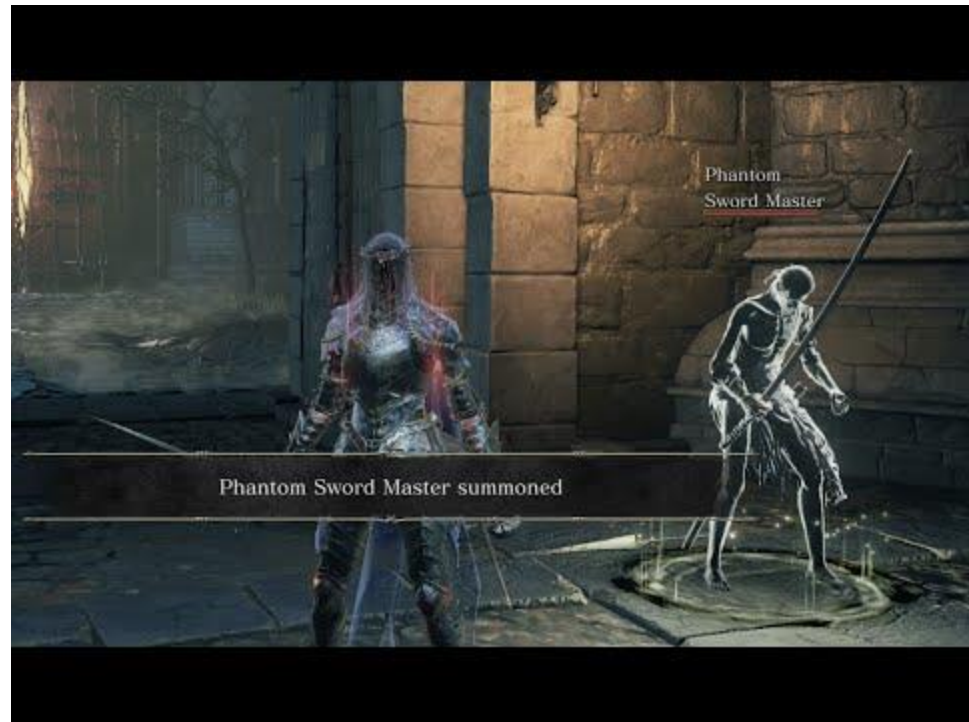


Figure 3, Screenshot from Dark Souls III (Dhimitri)

The game diegetically pushes heroes towards learning, taking advice and assistance from other heroes who have gone before and giving the same to heroes who will come after. This parallels reality in that there are players that have played the game before and gained knowledge of its systems and world, and that more players will begin the game every day who will need assistance to succeed. The game is so intentionally difficult and vague that it is incredibly hard to complete without guidance from outside sources.

What this implies is quite engrossing; the game is implicitly encouraging non-diegetic cooperation outside of the game through its diegetic themes. Indeed, this encouragement is not an explicit one, but the results speak to the intended effect, as the

Souls games have one of the most well-regarded internet communities surrounding a game. Jordan Palithorpe of Emerson College states;

(Dark Souls) effectively creates a discourse community and brings others together to figure out how to parse its systems. I think the majority who appreciate these games do so because it forces people to talk to each other. The game intentionally creates a viral moment of interest where everyone is trying to parse the game together, to uncover mechanical secrets and share strategies for progressing that would be incredibly difficult to do alone. (Hamilton)

Non-diegetic communities around games are certainly nothing new or revolutionary, but that the *Souls* series diegetically but not explicitly encourages non-diegetic activity is a fascinating technique with wonderful results. In terms of a cooperative metanarrative, Dark Souls is the outstanding example. Not only does it succeed in conveying feelings of loneliness in this large, desolate world, but conveys the necessity for cooperation throughout the game through hints and aid. The game's community has grown to reflect this and is largely considered one of the friendliest gaming communities on the internet.

The design principles that accomplished this monumental achievement are not difficult to dissect and codify, but the principles themselves are incredibly risky undertakings. The game design philosophy of purposefully obscuring information is entirely antithetical to the traditional game design of empowering players with the necessary information to overcome game challenges. Furthermore, the reliance this game has on the community around it actually forming and becoming useful is massive; that

the community would enthusiastically gather around the game is not a reasonable expectation for just any game. The steps the game takes are fairly simple: obscure information, require extensive amounts of effort to be put into understanding the game's world and systems, and hope that the necessary player enthusiasm towards your game follows. The design of the *Souls* games is an incredibly confident one, and was only made possible by the strong theme, tonal consistency, and well-realized aesthetic. Creating a game in the style of *Dark Souls* is not a task to be undertaken lightly.

The game's cooperative metanarrative, and its requirement for collaboration and focus on the importance of such, have had one of the most resounding effects on the gaming ecosystem in the medium's history. The diegetic themes of these games have non-diegetically bonded the game's player base together, teaching the player to understand these themes by experiencing them, pushing players into "jolly cooperation" in their struggle against the harrowing world of the *Souls* games.

LET ME READ YOUR MIND

"Entertainment takes it as a given that I cannot affect it other than in brutish, exterior ways: turning it off, leaving the theater, pausing the disc, stuffing in a bookmark, underlining a phrase. But for those television programs, films, and novels febrile with self-consciousness, entertainment pretends it is unaware of me, and I allow it to.

Playing video games is not quite like this. The surrender is always partial. You get control and are controlled. Games are patently aware of you and have a physical dimension unlike any other form of popular entertainment. Even though you may be granted lunar influence over a

game's narrative tides, the fact that there is any narrative at all reminds you that a presiding intelligence exists within the game along with you, and it is this sensation that invites the otherwise unworkable comparisons between games and other forms of narrative art.”

-Tom Bissel, *Extra Lives* (Bissell)

The player of any single-player video game is always playing against a game that is handicapped. Computers are faster at the computations that video games require than any human mind could ever hope to be. The game could, at any point, defeat the player completely through perfect responses to their input. The game, after all, is processing and representing the player's input on screen; it has knowledge of what the player's avatar will do before they even do it. The game, as a system, knows at all times the position, the resources, and the possible actions a player could take. However, games are programmed in such a way that they don't utilize perfect information. The game's antagonizing forces process limited data and make committed decisions to create realistic and conquerable challenges for the player. Games have set behaviors that the player can understand and then take advantage of, creating situations that give the player a sense of achievement. A simple example of this is the Goombas from Super Mario Bros. Goombas are programmed to move on a set path and have set behavior. The player very quickly learns this set behavior, and how to exploit their preprogrammed routines to defeat or avoid them and progress. In diegetic terms, player input and processing are usually non-diegetic; in the realm of the game, actions taken by the player are diegetically

represented, but the actual outside input, processing, and surroundings of the game that causes these actions are not traditionally diegetic.

In *Metal Gear Solid*, the game breaks this tradition on multiple occasions by including elements peripheral to the software as diegetic. In what has become one of the most legendary moments in video games, Solid Snake approaches the telepathic Psycho Mantis, both player and protagonist ready to fight him. But no matter what Snake or the player does, they can't land a hit on Psycho Mantis. The telepathic antagonist taunts Snake (and the player directly), stating "I can read your every thought!" (Kojima). The game, represented by Psycho Mantis, is detecting the players every action, and "reacting" to those actions perfectly. The player is unable to defeat Psycho Mantis at this point because he possesses ultimate control over the situation, able to detect and react to the player's every move. Psycho Mantis even asserts his control over the game's systems by



Figure 4, Screenshot from Metal Gear Solid(Metal Gear Solid Wiki)

“telepathically” activating the rumble function on the player’s controller, making it shake

and move around as if he is manipulating the real world from within the game. He'll also turn the screen black, pretending that he's switched the player's television input. Psycho Mantis also reads the player's memory card, quoting things like "You like *Castlevania*, don't you?" (Kojima) if the player has save files from *Castlevania, Symphony of the Night* on their memory card, and other game specific dialogue for different game save files (Figure 4). Psycho Mantis appears to be entirely aware of the surroundings of his digital realm and to be entirely in control of it. Furthermore, the player experiences the same feelings of helplessness that Solid Snake does; while the fiction may be stating the Psycho Mantis is reading Snake's mind, the gameplay is forcing the player to experience the closest thing they can to having Psycho Mantis read their mind.

Solid Snake receives one saving grace after struggling against Psycho Mantis for a while, in the form of a message from his commanding officer: "I've got it! Use the controller port! Plug your controller into controller port 2. If you do that, he won't be able to read your mind!" (Kojima). To beat Psycho Mantis, the player must unplug the controller from the default player 1 controller port, and plug it into the player 2 port⁶, usually only reserved for multiplayer games. Once this is done, Psycho Mantis exclaims "What? I cannot read you!" (Kojima), and the player can, from that point, damage and defeat Psycho Mantis.

This set of mechanics implies that the player has confused Psycho Mantis, and thus, confused the game. The player didn't defeat the game through in-game actions; they defeated the game by circumnavigating the game's "logic", where the game, represented

⁶ This action differs slightly depending on the different console ports of the games, but this description is regarding the original Playstation port from 1998. Other ports of the game execute similar actions or simulate those actions.

by Psycho Mantis, was reading the inputs of the player through the initial player controller port and utilizing that to defeat the player. The player had to undermine the game's absolute control in the digital realm by taking an action in the physical reality that the game can have no control over. Every button press, joystick push, or decision sent into a game's systems can be overridden, undermined, or changed by the game's logic; but the game cannot control the player's manipulation of the PlayStation that the game is dependent on. This is a strange and fascinating commentary on control; the game controls all its logic, and every in-game action that the player takes is at the mercy of the game's programming. But the game ultimately exists only in a virtual plane and can only exert so much control over our reality, one in which the player is in ultimate control. The commentary on the relationship the player has with the virtual world and the virtual world has with the real world, and the control dynamic involved, is an engrossing way to both somber and empower the player.

Similar instances occur throughout the *Metal Gear* series, and through other games. In *X-Men* for the Sega Genesis/Mega Drive, the final level of the game asks the player to "reset the computer" in the game, but then provides no in game action for the player to take to do so. The game has converged the in-game computer with the player's game console, "and what the game actually required was for the player to perform a soft reset⁷ on his or her own Mega Drive by lightly pressing the reset button" (Conway). This is another example of extending the fiction to include traditionally non-diegetic systems related to the game.

⁷ A "Soft reset" is a computer controlled reset of a machine, as opposed to a "Hard Reset" which is equivalent to unplugging and plugging a computer back in. Soft resets often retain some data hard resets do not as they control the shutdown process.

Playing with the ability of a player to control the game through extended fiction is a somewhat common technique in extended fiction game design; another example of this occurs in *Emily Is Away*. *Emily is Away* is a game that takes place in a simulated instant messaging window, recollect of the late 90's program AOL Instant Messenger (known as AIM), with themes about the awkwardness of youthful relationships. It consists of a very simple control scheme and story, with simple dialogue choices to respond. However, near the climax of the game, the game's controls are drastically altered.

Throughout the game, the player input to the game consists of two actions; the first is a numbered dialogue choice selection, where the player selects one of three options for the instant message they want to send. The second part requires the player to tap on the keyboard to simulate typing out the message itself; each keyboard press will print a character to the text box window, though the actual content is limited to the chosen prewritten dialogue choice. At the climax of the game, this input flow is interrupted; the player is presented with choices for dialogue, but when they attempt to type them out using the second half of the input process, their dialogue choice is typed out, deleted, and replaced with something else. The player is rendered helpless as their avatar can't bring themselves to make the dialogue choices that might salvage their relationship with the titular character of the game.

The execution of this is masterful; the reality of the helplessness that the player experiences in this moment parallels the helplessness that their avatar is being portrayed as feeling; through forcefully restricting the player's ability to affect the game and its characters, the player is pushed into experiencing the same emotions of helplessness that are preventing the avatar from acting. This provides a very different experience to that of

the Psycho Mantis boss fight; Psycho Mantis causes loss of the protagonist's physical self-control in combat, evoking feelings of helplessness in both the protagonist and player due to total lack of physical control over the game. The feelings of helplessness in the player in *Emily Is Away*, however, are caused by emotional helplessness of the protagonist, but renders the player just as helpless as they were in *Metal Gear Solid*. Both are communicated through experienced gameplay, instead of conveyed via narrative, but both deliver different narratives through almost the same methods.

My personal experience with this technique took place in the design of *Justice.exe*, a short mobile game developed for my *When Machines Decide* praxis lab. In the game, the player is given a binary choice of swiping left and right to sentence criminals to minimum or maximum sentences. The game is centered around the concept of machine learning in criminal justice sentencing, and so, in the end of the game, the machine learning algorithm that was being trained by the player through their choices is given control of decision making; the player is left with not control as the machine applies what it thinks the player was making their decisions based off of. This results in the machine sometimes sentencing more or less harshly based on race, gender, zip code, or other factors that most players would not account for in their sentencing of criminals. The game diegetically removes control from the player in order to reflect the dangers of machine learning being put in control in our society. The game was simple, and perhaps not long enough to be successful in emotionally affecting the player a great deal, but it was a valuable experience in designing extended fiction and was reasonably successful in emotionally conveying the dangers of machine learning in criminal sentencing through gameplay.

This design technique is easily broken down; first, the player thinks that they're in a position of control, which is almost a given for any player familiar with video games. Then, at some point, their position of control over the software must be brought into question, through taking that control away or manipulating it in some way. After that, if the goal is to re-empower the player, providing some unique, outside-the-box solution to manipulate the game's digital world is effective in establishing the player's position of outside control while still effectively imparting on them the message the game wishes to send. If the goal isn't to re-empower, but to sober the player, then it's unnecessary to give them a special action peripheral to the game to assert their control. The hard part is to frame this design style in a unique way, since its execution in *Metal Gear Solid* is so infamous, replicating it for the same purposes wouldn't have the same shocking effect.

Extended fiction which plays with a player's level of control over the game system is an intriguing way to cause emotional resonance in the player through gameplay. It heightens the immersion of the player, highlighting and critiquing their actual relationship with the game software in order to bring about much more existential narrative, both within the game and within the player.

FLOWERS FOR M[A]CHINES

High scores. S ranks. Victory screens. Upgrades. Saving the princess. All are traditional goal states for the players of video games, and for good reason. Whether in games with or without narrative, competitive games or single-player experiences, quantitative representations of success and progressing mastery are deeply satisfying and motivating for players. Jane McGonigal states in *Reality is Broken*, "Fun from games

arises out of mastery. It arises out of comprehension....With games, learning is the drug” (McGonigal).

This is what Milan Jaćević, a researcher at the Center for Computer Games Research at IT University of Copenhagen, reflects on as the “implied player”, and goes further to separate from the player as a person, the “implied being”;

Much like the implied reader, the implied player is a construct whose elements can be traced to the structure of the game... the player is presumed to be willing and able to take part in, and complete, goal-oriented ludic schemas such as quests... on the macrostructural level, the player is presumed to be willing and able to follow the game’s macrostructure to the end... While the notion of the implied player comprises a set of expectations for behavior, the notion of the implied being includes a set of engagement criteria expected of the moral, cultural, embodied being interacting with the game and the values on offer therein. These values can be interpellated and negotiated not necessarily in gameplay, but rather from gameplay, during moments of reflection inspired by gameplay experiences and subsequent interaction with the wider player community. (Jaćević)

It stands to reason, then, that clever designers in games would seek to undermine the relationship between the implied player and implied being for critical purposes. This is done in many examples by introducing narrative reasons to perform poorly, lose, or otherwise forfeit success for a greater ethical narrative purpose. Extending the fiction to include the implied player’s goals is a great way to create conflict within the implied

being. Part of them wishes to perform well, as many have been conditioned to do by years of traditional games (not just video games, but other forms of competition and achievement as well). But this part of their psyche is challenged by the ethical or narrative structures the game presents, and so their own value structure in relationship to the game is challenged. Jaćević calls this “ludeoethical tension”, describing it as “evoking a feeling of tension in the player between ludic ability (and the need to exercise it to progress in the game) on the one hand, an ethical inability on the other” (Jaćević).

A great example of ludeoethical tension takes place in the game *Life Is Strange*, a narrative adventure game developer Dontnod Entertainment released in 2015. The game’s protagonist, Max, finds herself with the ability to rewind time, and the game takes place around decision making and puzzle solving elements with the ability for her, and ultimately the player, to reverse time at any point and try to mold events to their desired outcomes. Most narrative adventure games⁸ such as *Life is Strange* or Telltale’s *The Walking Dead* are based heavily on a structure that changes events drastically based on player choice, with events in game that take place 20 hours after a decision sometimes being influenced by an earlier player choice. Often, the culmination of these decisions is the reward for the player; a grand climax that takes into account a large number of player decisions and combines them to drastically influence the ending.

Life is Strange handles this in a peculiar but intensely interesting way; at the end of the game, a choice is presented. Throughout the game, Max’s main goal is to try and help her troubled friend Chloe, who’s prone to finding herself in life-threatening

⁸ Games that revolve around very little second to second reflex based gameplay, instead implementing more choice and puzzle based adventures.

situations that require Max to rewind time to save her. But Max's usage of her time travel powers has had an unintended effect on the world around her, causing a massive tornado to form and threaten her home town of Arcadia Bay. It's made clear at the end of the game that there is a binary choice: take shelter with Chloe and allow the tornado to destroy Arcadia Bay and everyone in it, or rewind time all the way back to the first instance of Max saving Chloe, and allow Chloe to die so that Max never causes the tornado to form in the first place.

What's presented here is much more than just a terrible choice for a person to make, it's also a choice for the player. Do they metaphorically throw away all the effort they made in the game to save Chloe in order to make the ethical choice? The game presents the ethical choice as one contrary to the goals of the player throughout the entire game. All the player's successes and carefully made choices will be diegetically lost, and more importantly, the goal of the game as was understood up to this point, which was to help the troubled Chloe, will be an abject failure. It's a moment that causes great frustration and emotional turmoil in the player, not only because of the inherent tragedy of the on-screen events, but because of the inherent ludic sacrifice the player will have to make, whether of their ethical grounds or of their personal attachments to game-oriented success.

In a more direct example, *Manhunt* presents a similar conflict between implied player and implied being, described in *Manhunt – The Dilemma of Play*;

In a macabre twist, the player is awarded extra points for completing more gruesome executions. Within the context of the game, points serve no function or purpose. In the game, nobody knows or cares that you, the

player, got more points. Their only purpose seems to be to tempt the player. To force the player to question how much he really values what is essentially a meaningless measure of achievement. How far would you go for a few points more? As a game player, how do you value your competitiveness and achievements as a player (get the most points) versus doing the right thing in the context of the narrative? What does it mean to be a good player? (Zagal)

Herein lies a direct and clear example of ludoethical tension; while traditional goals of video games revolve around high scores, and gaining points being an ultimate good, *Manhunt* and games like it create great discomfort in the tension they create between the classical conditioning players have to score more points, and the great moral stress inflicted on them through performing the actions required to get more points.

Another, albeit brief example of this narrative device is present in *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*. *Hellblade* is a game with surreal themes, where the titular character is experiencing extreme psychosis and is accompanied at almost all times by voices in her head, manifesting to the player as binaural audio. These voices are sometimes helpful, like when they warn the player of incoming attacks, and sometimes malicious, like when they taunt Senua throughout the game. The game takes place from a third person standpoint, with sword-based combat regularly occurring throughout the game, that requires the player to perform well to defeat enemies and move on.

In the climactic battle of the game, the player is presented with a horde of enemies that respawn infinitely. The only way to complete the battle is to allow the enemies to kill Senua. This is prompted by the voices Senua hear encouraging her to “let go, let go of

your battle” (*Hellblade*). This prevents a somewhat different ludeoethical tension within the player; they must abandon learned practices of fighting and struggling against monsters for Senua to finally find peace and let go of her inner demons, those demons being her struggle to come to terms with the death of a loved one. While not as sacrificial as the player choosing to nullify the struggle they had against the game for the ethical choice in games like *Life is Strange* or *Nier: Automata*, it does bring about a similar emotional effect as was achieved with *Emily is Away*; the player must choose to stop struggling against the enemies that face them, give up any hope of ludic victory, and let go, in the same way that Senua must give up her struggle and come to terms with her loss. “As she learns to accept death Senua also learns to accept her own darkness — and the fact that it’ll always be with her.” (Williams)

This game design relies heavily on player attachment to the game’s narrative. For example, if Arcadia Bay of *Life is Strange* felt like a wooden town with uninteresting or even despicable characters, very few players would feel ethically motivated to save it from destruction instead of losing the well written and complex character of Chloe, who represents in many ways the repeated success of the player. If the player had no attachment to the survival of Senua from *Hellblade*, the final surrender would be a pointless and uninteresting twist. First and foremost, games that wish to create ludeoethical tension between implied player and implied being must have compelling stories and characters, and gameplay that provides value to the implied player. Games that don’t offer significant motivation for the implied player cannot create ludeoethical tension if the player is easily motivated to abandon the gameplay achievement in favor of ethical choices. Following those two daunting requirements, it’s a simple matter of

providing a situation which pits the player's sense of morality or attachment to narrative against the game's traditional gameplay success states. The intrinsic conflict this design philosophy causes within the player creates markedly impactful gameplay moments, immersing not only the player, but their motivations as a part of the game and its narrative.

OUR CHOICES MAKE US

The penultimate non-diegetic element in relation to any game is the player. Already discussed in earlier sections are games that explicitly acknowledge the player as part of the extended fiction, and while these games provide great exploration of interesting narrative and metanarrative concepts, they aren't exactly searing in their critiques: *Earthbound* provides an emotionally resonant but not critical view of the player as a savior, *Icey* provides a playful, thoughtful rivalry between player and developer, and *Life is Strange* takes into account the anticipated goals of the implied player in order to pit them against emotional attachments to implied being. This chapter will discuss the player in a diegetically ambiguous position, and specifically how ambiguous player-avatar relationships provide deep immersion and critique of the player-avatar relationship. Matthew Weise describes this concept as it appears in metal gear solid as such;

Metal Gear Solid stretches the membrane between the fictional world and the real world as a way of bringing player and fiction together -- not driving them apart. It does this by reveling in the ambiguous nature of the player-avatar relationship. The player is Snake, but not Snake. Snake is the player, but not the player. When characters look at Snake they often

see Snake, but they just as often see the player, staring right through Snake's eyes. (Weise)

In other words, an ambiguous player-avatar relationship is a situation in which the player is not explicitly acknowledged as diegetic, but the themes, dialogue, and overall presentation of the game heavily imply knowledge of the player's presence. More importantly, the responsibility for the events that take place in the game are often ambiguously attributed to the player, implying that the (often horrific) results of the player actions are the fault of the player for interacting in the first place. This is a form of player culpability, or implication of the player as accountable for the actions their avatar takes in the game⁹. These situations are often presented in graphically and narratively surrealistic ways, as was the case with *Earthbound*'s acknowledgement of the player in its surreal climax. To describe a technique based in surrealism, there's no better place to start than *Hotline Miami*.

Hotline Miami is a game about violence, described most commonly as "ultraviolent" (Onyett). The game revolves around the protagonist receiving over-the-phone instructions to clear buildings full of Russian mobsters and following out those orders with a variety of weapons and in the most brutal and stylized ways possible. Baseball bats, golf clubs, machetes, knives, guns, and bare hands are all used to create bright red splatter marks that track the player's bloody trail through the level. The game induces such a heart-pumping adrenaline rush in its fine-tuned gameplay that any trepidation the player might have about the sickening violence is lost in the thrill of the

⁹ This is not meant to imply that *Metal Gear Solid* does not have a culpable player, as the actions of the player character are usually no more horrific than that of any spy movie action hero.

interaction. The game makes its ultraviolent content fun and satisfying, drawing the player in, making them want more, but then questions why they so thoroughly enjoy the violent acts their avatar commits in the game.

Hotline Miami has an ambiguous player-avatar relationship that makes the player culpable. The player avatar is no hero rescuing a victim in distress, or a vigilante stopping bad guys from doing bad things. Their violent rampages are just that, a bad person killing other bad people, given directions by likely even worse people. The game contains no morality, no redemption; its addicting gameplay is its own reward, and yet the enjoyment of that reward is questioned by the game itself. “Do you enjoy hurting other people?” the game asks (Hotline Miami). “You’re not a very good person, are you?” it states (Hotline Miami). The player is not progressing through the game with a greater purpose or performing horrific acts for a greater good; they are doing what they’re told to do by the game, the only thing they’re allowed to do by the game: “The only way to truly interact with the world is to kill. Such is the case with many games, yet few call out the inanity of it so bluntly” (Onyett).

Like *Manhunt*, *Hotline Miami* forces the player to be culpable, though in a different sense. While the culpability of the player in *Manhunt* relies on their choices, that being whether they execute more or less gruesome executions for points, *Hotline Miami* has no such choice. When the game asks, “Do you like hurting other people?” (Hotline Miami), there is no diegetic answer “no” for the player to respond. The only way for the player to respond to the ethical side of the ludoethical tension the game causes is for them to stop playing. Continuing the game makes implies that the player is culpable in the actions their avatar takes, no matter how horrific. Continuation of the game, especially

beyond the point where the game declares you “not a very good person” (Hotline Miami), is an admission of complete surrender of the implied being to the implied player.

Another game in this style is *Spec Ops: The Line*. A game adaption of *Heart of Darkness*, *Spec Ops* tasks the player avatar, a generic but likable army captain with venturing into the ruins of modern-day Dubai in an attempt to find the missing John Konrad. This presents a perfect example of the unremarkable character that’s often present in games with ambiguous player-avatar relationships. This type is usually devoid of distinguishing features, sometimes being entirely silent and often never being seen from a third-person perspective by the player in first person games. Captain Walker is a character with voice acting and some personality, but he is a character that provides an easy avatar for a player to identify with, and thus it is more difficult for the player to distinguish between their actions and the actions of their avatar.

As the game progresses, Walker and his team are forced into increasingly grisly situations, all seemingly caused by the cruelty of Konrad. At one point, Walker and his team are pinned down by enemy gunfire, and so launch White Phosphorus¹⁰ into the enemy combatants, only to realize when the combat has ceased that they murdered a large group of civilians in doing so. As the game progresses, it’s surrealistic and ghastly imagery seep into even the loading screen messages of the game, with quotes such as “Do you feel like a hero yet?” (Yager) taking the place of what started as helpful gameplay

¹⁰ White phosphorus is a material made from a common allotrope of the chemical element phosphorus that is used in smoke, tracer illumination, and incendiary munitions. As an incendiary weapon, white phosphorus is pyrophoric (self-igniting), burns fiercely and can ignite cloth, skin, fuel, ammunition, and other combustibles. (“White Phosphorus Munitions.”)

tips. The insanity and eerie tone of the game permeates through every aspect of it, with player characters becoming more battered and bloodied as the game progresses.

In the end of the game, as Walker alone approaches Konrad's penthouse in the Burj Khalifa, he finds Konrad dead, having committed suicide before the story of the game had even began. Konrad's voice over the radio was entirely imagined by Walker, him being pushed into disassociating the atrocities he committed and blaming them on the imagined Konrad. The hundreds of NPCs murdered over the course of the game were murdered entirely by Walker. As another one of the game's loading screens states, "The US military does not condone the killing of unarmed combatants. But this isn't real, so why should you care?". The game uses the non-diegetic loading screens to explicitly address a non-diegetic player, but the diegetic narrative of the game implies and indicts the player in a much more serious capacity. The confusion of the player, their complicitous in the atrocities committed, all are implicitly attributed to the player. One of the writers of *Spec Ops*, Richard Pearsy, described the conclusion as such; "When the Delta Squad arrives, Konrad faces exposure and humiliation and takes what he sees as the only honorable way out – suicide. In the end he literally paints a picture of the player's sins, presenting the player with the dilemma Konrad, himself, faced. What have I done? How do you feel about what you have done?" (Pearsy)

The player's continued interactions with the game implicate them in the results of those actions; the massacre committed by Walker is only enabled by the player's continued insistence on playing the game, despite the intense narrative ludoethical tension it provides.

One of the most iconic games that examines and comments on player motivation and provides pointed ludoethical tension is *Bioshock*. *Bioshock* does this through enthusiastically embracing of the concept of extended cognition, a “theory states that our cognition (or mind) includes not just the brain, but also the body and the surrounding environment” (Cuddy). This feeds into the notion that the character in the game is not a separate entity, controlled by the player, but an extension of the player themselves. *Bioshock* encourages its player-avatar ambiguity by making the protagonist virtually indistinguishable from the player; the player never sees the avatar’s face, never hears them speak, and the only distinguishing feature the player can find on the character’s model is the chain tattoos on the avatar’s wrists. First-person perspective games will usually involve a combination of voice acting, and cutscenes featuring the protagonist, distinguishing them as a defined character, but *Bioshock* doesn’t. This is purposeful; the player avatar is meant to be as transparent as possible, removing the buffer between the player and the game world. *Bioshock* removes almost all separation of player from the avatar, directing the game’s themes and commentary right at the player with all but explicit acknowledgement; there is no buffer between the character’s choices and their avatar’s choices. The actions are not Nathan Drake’s or Jane Shepard’s, they are the player’s actions, and the player’s consequences as well.

Bioshock’s formula for guiding the player through the game is a common one; the player is given direction over a short-wave radio by a friendly Irish voice belonging to a man named Atlas. This guide, a man claiming to be just as trapped in the city of Rapture as the player’s avatar is, guides the player, giving them direction, helping them through obstacles and leading them towards their eventual salvation, always with a polite “Would

you kindly...” before instruction (Bioshock). The game even offers convenient notifications of the next step in the players quest to clearly convey all the necessary information.

Bioshock's twists and turns lead it to a climax in which Rapture's founder, Andrew Ryan, looks up from his office putting green and asks “Stop, would you kindly?” as the player avatar is walking towards him. Control is wrested from the player and the avatar stops. “Sit, would you kindly?” Ryan asks, and the avatar sits. “Stand, would you kindly?”, and the avatar stands. Ryan proceeds to walk up the player and state his designated mantra: “A man chooses, a slave obeys”. And then, Ryan hands the player avatar his golf club, utters the single word “Kill”, and, looking into the camera all the time, repeats “A man chooses, a slave obeys” as he is beaten to death by the player's avatar (Bioshock). The player is helpless to intervene. “Would you kindly” is revealed to be a hypnotically implanted as a trigger phrase that compels the character to act without question. They have lost all control over their avatar's actions. The instructions they thought they had been willingly following throughout the course of the game had turned out to be controlling them. Through the extended cognition that the game works so hard to imply, they've lost control over themselves.

Shortly after, the player regains control just as quickly as it was taken away. Again, as if no revelation had taken place, Atlas asks the player “Would you kindly” hand control of the city's security systems over to him, and the game's quest marker dings with the next notification as though everything is normal. The player has been broken; they have been betrayed and shown their own weakness, their total lack of

control in this world. The effect this has on the player is well described in *Bioshock* and Philosophy:

Gadamer said that there are always risks in any case of a fusion of horizons. One of these risks is having a completely unforeseen experience, or the risk of being changed yourself by the horizon of the “other”—whether the other is a person, a book, a work of art, or a video game. Is this not precisely what happens at the twist of *Bioshock*? The player plods through the game with a certain hermeneutic horizon that the game maintains up until the twist. Then, it pulls the rug out from under that horizon. The game invalidates it. When successful, *Bioshock*’s twist sends players reeling. They are left holding fragments of their naive horizon, and broken concepts of what kind of game *Bioshock* was expected to be.

(Cuddy)

The player is once again left holding the pieces and asking themselves “why?”. Why proceed with the horrific actions necessary to complete *Bioshock*? Why persist through this horrible world and unquestioningly kill and plunder for a faceless voice? Why continue after the moment when it has been so obvious that you are the “slave”, and not the “man”?

So how do they do it? Ambiguous player-avatar relationships, player culpability, and ludoethical tension are perhaps the most complex of the extended fiction techniques discussed in this paper. The game’s first and foremost rely heavily on their tone; tonal consistency with the critique that the game wants to make of the player is an absolute necessity. This includes not just the narrative and atmosphere of the game, but the

gameplay as well; games that wish to make the player culpable in horrific acts must force them to participate in truly despicable actions and participate in them in a core sense. The player must be characterized by the gameplay actions they take. Richard Pearsy writes of this regarding *Spec Ops*;

“Lastly, we decided to tie characterization directly to core game mechanics. Character is action, and this is doubly true in *The Line*, where for the most part, players use a single set of mechanics during both combat and narrative events. This features most prominently in the game's "decision scenes". (Pearsy)

Finally, the games must confront the player, implicitly forcing them to reconcile with the actions they took. But importantly, the game shouldn't confront the player in a necessarily judgmental way; much more effective is the presentation of the events in their true context, leaving the player to judge themselves. Ludoethical tension and player culpability cannot be forced onto a player, they must be implied and experienced naturally.

These games that ask questions of the player, that confront them and demand them to look inwards and discover their own intentions to address their resolution to ludoethical tension, achieve perhaps the most successful form of metanarrative, because it is an entirely unique metanarrative. Why the player chooses to play, why they choose to continue, these are all questions each player can only answer for themselves. The player's interpretation of what the game is asking them and what their own answers are can and do vary wildly. The game has taken a personal interest in them; it has asked what they think. It has prompted them not to look deeper into the game, but into themselves.

CONCLUSION

Video games contain one vital element that separates them from all other forms of art; they are directly interactive. Interactivity is defined as "... (of two people or things) influencing each other" (Oxford). Players are required to influence the game and successful video games influence the player in return, but it is typically influencing them to an entertained state. Games try to create feelings of excitement in the player, or feelings based on the narrative events that happen on the screen. Metanarrative video games pursue a different kind of emotional invocation—they pursue the idea of making the player feel things about themselves, making the player understand the medium of video games on a more philosophical level. They push to make the player as much a part of the interactive experience as they can, extending the fiction of the game to include more than just the events that take place on the screen. They bring the player in, disregarding the barriers between the physical and digital worlds. They seek to humble, to encourage, to promote feelings of importance and feelings of control, or to destroy any sense of these that the player might have. Video games that contain and utilize extended fiction build an uncommon and deep relationship with the player and the world around them to make the interaction between them mean more than a simple position of outside control. These kinds of games are not satisfied with being interacted with and displaying the results of those interactions on a screen; they demand to affect the player, just as much as the player affects them.

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