For a New Kind of Game

Notes Toward a Poetics of the Role-Playing Game

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Writing Sample

I. Opening

The question of whether games can be "art" has grown tedious—less because it has been answered than because it has been asked badly. The debate tends to proceed by analogy: games are like films, or like novels, or like nothing else at all, and therefore deserve (or do not deserve) the status we accord to established forms. But this comparative impulse often conceals what it claims to reveal. To ask whether games can be art is already to assume we know what art is and what games are, when in fact both terms become unstable under pressure. More productive, I think, is to ask what happens when we treat games as if they already are art—bringing to them the same quality of attention we bring to novels or films, and seeing what such attention discloses.

This essay is adapted from a piece I wrote in Chinese around 2014, originally posted on a game enthusiast forum. I was in my late teens, had spent years playing and tinkering with RPGs, and had begun reading literary theory on my own—searching for language adequate to experiences the gaming discourse of the time could not articulate. Revisiting that essay a decade later, I find that some of its enthusiasms now embarrass me, some of its predictions proved wrong, and some of its examples have dated. The single-player RPG, which I then eulogized as a dying form, has seen an unexpected revival: *Disco Elysium* (2019), *Baldur's Gate 3* (2023), and the continued output of Japanese studios have demonstrated that the form retains both commercial viability and artistic ambition. The Chinese RPG industry I wrote about has transformed beyond recognition, pivoting almost entirely to mobile and online games.

Yet the core questions I raised then still seem worth asking, and the theoretical framework I sketched still seems useful—perhaps more useful now, when a new generation of narrative-driven games invites fresh analysis. What follows, then, is neither a translation of the original nor an entirely new work, but an adaptation: the arguments refined, the examples updated where necessary, the framework tested against games that did not exist when I first wrote. Where the original's insights have held up, I have preserved them; where they required revision, I have revised. The reader should understand this essay as a dialogue between my younger and present selves—a document of sustained thinking about a form I have never stopped caring about.

What follows emerges from over a decade spent playing and occasionally making role-playing games, alongside an autodidact's engagement with literary theory, narratology, and modern Chinese fiction. I write not as a credentialed humanist but as someone for whom games posed questions that only the humanities seemed equipped to answer: questions of authorial presence in collaborative media, of narrative structure in non-linear texts, of emotional register in interactive storytelling. The game that moves us to tears and the game that leaves us cold may differ by only a few lines of dialogue, a single musical cue, a moment

held too long or released too soon. What accounts for this difference? The vocabulary of "fun" and "gameplay" cannot reach it. We need other tools.

The tools I reach for here come from two traditions rarely brought into contact: Western narratology, particularly Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of polyphony, and modern Chinese literary criticism, particularly the narrative techniques of Eileen Chang. This combination is not arbitrary. Bakhtin's concept of polyphonic narrative—in which multiple independent voices coexist without subordination to a single authorial perspective—finds its fullest realization not in the novel but in the role-playing game, where dozens of NPCs, collectible texts, and environmental details constitute a chorus of simultaneous voices that the player navigates freely.[1] Meanwhile, Chang's characteristic technique of anti-climax—her habit of deflating emotional peaks through sudden tonal shifts—offers a model for game narrative that avoids the twin failures of cold formalism and sentimental excess.[2] These are not the only tools available, but they are the ones that have proven most useful to me in understanding why some games succeed as narrative experiences and others, despite evident craft, do not.

A word on examples. I draw primarily on two traditions of story-driven RPGs: the Chinese lineage represented by the *Chinese Paladin* (*Xianjian Qixia Zhuan*) and *Xuan-Yuan Sword* (*Xuanyuan Jian*) series, and the broader East Asian tradition including Japanese RPGs such as Falcom's *Legend of Heroes* (*Eiyū Densetsu*) series. These share certain conventions—turn-based or semi-real-time combat, linear main narratives with extensive side content, emphasis on character relationships and emotional storytelling—that distinguish them from the Western CRPG tradition of *Baldur's Gate* or *Fallout*, with its greater emphasis on player choice and systemic complexity. I also draw on recent Western RPGs, particularly *Disco Elysium* (2019), which represents a remarkable synthesis: a game with the narrative density of the East Asian tradition and the systemic ambition of the Western one. The Chinese games are likely unfamiliar to most English-language readers; they have received little scholarly attention outside the Sinophone world, despite constituting a rich and distinctive tradition. Part of my purpose here is simply to bring this tradition into view.

One final note on method. I write as someone who has both played and made games, however amateurishly. This dual position carries risks: the practitioner may lack critical distance; the critic may lack practical understanding. But it also carries advantages. I know from experience how a line of dialogue can fall flat in testing despite looking fine on paper; how a scene can acquire unexpected resonance from its placement in a larger structure; how the gap between intention and execution haunts every creative decision. Theory, for me, is not an external framework imposed on games but a way of articulating intuitions that arose from

1. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

2. Eileen Chang, "The Golden Cangue," in *Twentieth-Century Chinese Stories*, ed. C.T. Hsia, trans. Eileen Chang (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971).

practice. If what follows has any value, it lies in this: that it represents one person's sustained attempt to understand why certain games mattered to him, and what that mattering might teach us about the form.

II. On Feeling, Authorship, and Narrative Distance

The Death of the Author and Its Discontents

In 1967, Roland Barthes declared the death of the author.[3] The text, he argued, is not a vessel for authorial intention but a "tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centers of culture." To seek the author behind the text is to impose a false unity on what is essentially plural, to close down the infinite play of meaning in favor of a single, authoritative interpretation. The reader, not the author, is the site where textual meaning is produced. "The birth of the reader," Barthes famously concluded, "must be at the cost of the death of the Author."

Barthes's argument was directed against a particular kind of interpretive practice—the biographical criticism that sought to explain literary works by reference to their creators' lives and intentions. As polemic, it was effective. But taken as a general theory of textual production, it creates problems, particularly for collaborative and interactive media. A novel may plausibly be read as an authorless "tissue of quotations," but what of a game made by dozens or hundreds of people over several years? Is the author dead if there never was a single author to begin with? And what of the player, who does not merely "read" but actively intervenes in the text's unfolding? The Barthesian reader is still fundamentally passive, a site where meanings converge; the player is an agent whose choices shape what text exists to be interpreted at all.

Game studies has generally responded to these questions by abandoning authorship as a central concern. Attention has shifted to systems, mechanics, player experience—to what games *do* rather than what their makers *meant*. This shift has been productive. But it has also left certain questions unasked. When we praise a game's writing, what exactly are we praising? When a game's story moves us, what is the nature of that movement? These are questions about craft, about the decisions that shaped the text we encounter, and they cannot be answered without some notion of intentional making—without, that is, something like authorship.

I do not propose to resurrect the author in Barthes's sense: the godlike figure whose intentions fully determine textual meaning. But I want to suggest that games require a different model, one that acknowledges both the distributed nature of their production and the genuine presence of creative investment in their making. I call this model experiential

3. Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 142–148.

intervention. The idea is this: the maker of a narrative is neither absent from the work nor naively present in it, but *intervenes* in the work through the texture of lived experience—intervenes without dominating, shapes without dictating.

Experiential Intervention: A Third Position

The concept requires some unpacking. Consider first what it opposes.

On one side stands the position Barthes attacked: the author as origin and guarantor of meaning. In game terms, this would be the designer who imagines their intentions are transparently communicated, who believes the player will feel what they intended the player to feel. This position is untenable not because intentions do not exist but because the gap between intention and reception is constitutive of all communication, and nowhere more so than in interactive media where the player's choices intervene between design and execution.

On the other side stands a certain kind of formalism: the view that craft is essentially technical, that good writing is a matter of following rules, that emotional effect can be engineered through reliable procedures. This position is not wrong—technique matters enormously—but it is incomplete. It cannot explain why two games employing identical techniques can produce utterly different effects, why some writing feels alive and other writing feels dead even when both are "well-constructed." There is a residue that technique alone does not capture.

Experiential intervention names this residue. It is the trace of lived experience in made things—not autobiographical content (though that may be present) but something subtler: a quality of attention, a structure of feeling, an orientation toward the material. The classical Chinese critic Lu Ji, in his third-century treatise *Wenfu*, captured this with a striking image: "The stone conceals jade, and the mountain glows; the water harbors pearl, and the river gleams"—"The stone conceals jade, and the mountain glows; the water harbors pearl, and the river gleams." The inner quality radiates outward. One cannot point to it directly, but one senses its presence or absence. This is not mysticism; it is phenomenology. We *know* when a work has been made with care, even when we cannot fully articulate how we know.

What does this mean in practice? Consider the difference between a game made to satisfy market demands and a game made because its creators needed to make it. The former may be competent, even excellent by conventional measures; the latter carries a charge that competence alone cannot produce. This is not to say that commercial motives preclude genuine investment, or that passion guarantees quality. The relationship is subtler. Experiential intervention is present when the work bears the mark of necessity—when we sense that *this* story had to be told *this* way, that the choices made were not arbitrary but emerged from some pressure of experience seeking form.

Disco Elysium offers a striking example. The game's development team at ZA/UM

assigned dedicated writers to each of the protagonist's twenty-four internal "skills"—Inland Empire, Electrochemistry, Rhetoric, and so on—each representing a distinct voice within the player character's fractured psyche. This is distributed authorship in a literal sense: no single person wrote the game. Yet the result does not feel impersonal or designed-by-committee. Each voice is distinctive, fully inhabited, alive. The writers intervened in their material not as hired hands executing a design document but as artists whose own experiences—of addiction, of political hope and disillusionment, of the strangeness of being a conscious creature—shaped what they made. The "author" of *Disco Elysium* is not a single person but a collective investment, and this investment is palpable in every line.

The Dangers of Feeling: Against the Mandarin Ducks

But here a caution is necessary. If pure formalism risks coldness, unchecked emotional investment risks sentimentality. The history of popular narrative is littered with works that feel too much, that insist on their own emotional importance, that mistake intensity for depth. In Chinese literary history, this failure has a name: the Yuanyang Hudie Pai, or "Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies" school—a term of derision for the sentimental romances that flourished in early twentieth-century Shanghai. The label was often applied unfairly, but it names a real tendency: the inflation of feeling beyond what the narrative can support, the reliance on stock emotional situations (tragic love, noble sacrifice, tearful reunion) without the craft to earn them.

Games are susceptible to this failure in specific ways. The medium's formal properties—musical scoring, visual spectacle, player investment through time and effort—create powerful amplification effects. A scene that would read as maudlin on the page can overwhelm when accompanied by swelling strings and slow-motion cinematography. This amplification can produce genuine emotional power, but it can also produce kitsch: emotion without substance, feeling that evaporates on reflection. The player cries, then wonders why they cried, then feels vaguely embarrassed.

How to navigate between coldness and sentimentality? This is finally a question of *distance*—the narrative distance between maker and material, between text and reader, between emotional content and its presentation. Too much distance and the work feels inert, merely competent; too little and it feels cloying, manipulative. The challenge is to find the point of productive tension: close enough to feel, far enough to shape.

Experiential intervention is meant to name this productive tension. It is not raw self-expression but self-expression shaped by formal intervention. The maker is present in the work, but present as a craftsperson, not a confessor. Their experience informs the work without overwhelming it; their feeling is the ore from which the work is refined, not the work itself.

In the following section, I examine one exemplary solution to this problem of distance: the narrative technique of Eileen Chang, whose characteristic anti-climax offers a model for emotional writing that neither indulges nor represses feeling, but holds it in a state of charged suspension.

III. Eileen Chang and the Art of Anti-Climax

The Problem of Emotional Peaks

Every narrative that seeks to move its audience faces a structural problem: how to handle the moment of greatest emotional intensity. The death of a beloved character, the long-awaited reunion, the final confrontation, the confession of love—these are the peaks toward which narrative builds, and they are also the moments of greatest risk. Handled well, they can produce catharsis, that purgation of emotion Aristotle identified as tragedy's highest achievement. Handled poorly, they curdle into melodrama: emotion demanded rather than earned, feeling that announces itself too loudly and thereby undermines itself.

Games face this problem in acute form. The player has typically spent dozens of hours with the characters; the investment is real, measured not just in attention but in time, effort, and repeated choice. When a game attempts an emotional climax, it is calling on this accumulated investment—but it is also risking it. If the climax fails, if it feels unearned or overwrought, the failure is magnified by everything the player has put in. The betrayal is personal in a way that a novel's or film's failure is not.

The conventional solution is amplification: if the moment matters, *show* that it matters. Swell the music. Slow the frame rate. Hold the shot. Let characters speak their feelings at length. Give the player time to absorb the significance. This approach is not wrong—it has produced genuinely powerful moments across the history of the medium. But it is also dangerous. Amplification can easily tip into insistence, and insistence is the enemy of genuine feeling. The scene that tells us how to feel relieves us of the burden of feeling it ourselves.

Eileen Chang, the great Shanghai modernist, understood this danger with unusual clarity. Her solution was not to avoid emotional intensity but to approach it obliquely, through a technique I will call anti-climax: the deliberate deflation of emotional peaks through sudden tonal shifts, ironic juxtaposition, or narrative redirection. The effect is paradoxical. By refusing to dwell on the moment of greatest feeling, Chang makes that feeling linger. By cutting away, she cuts deeper.

"The Golden Cangue": A Case Study

Chang's 1943 novella *Jinsuo Ji* (*The Golden Cangue*),[4] widely regarded as her masterpiece, offers the clearest demonstration of this technique. The story follows Cao Qiqiao, a woman from a lower-class family who is married into a wealthy household as a combination wife and nursemaid to a paralyzed, bedridden son. The marriage gives her material security but denies her everything else: love, respect, physical fulfillment, autonomy. Over decades, she curdles into a monster of resentment, systematically destroying her children's chances at happiness because she cannot bear for them to have what she was denied.

The novella's emotional peak comes near the end, as Qiqiao lies dying. Chang grants us access to her interiority in a passage of devastating power. Qiqiao thinks back over her life, remembering a moment decades earlier when her brother-in-law—the one man she desired—touched her briefly in a doorway. This single touch has been the hidden center of her existence, the ember she has nursed through a lifetime of lovelessness.

Then comes an image of startling visual intensity: Qiqiao slides her glinting jade bracelet up along her arm—an arm now wasted to bone—pushing it all the way up to her armpit. The gesture is grotesque and hypnotic. The bracelet, symbol of the wealth she sold her life for, no longer fits; it slides freely up a limb that has withered to nothing. In this single image, Chang condenses an entire life's tragedy: the jewelry remains, but the body that was supposed to enjoy it has been consumed. The narrative distance that Chang typically maintains collapses completely. We are inside Qiqiao's grief, her rage, her terrible solitude.

And then, abruptly, Chang cuts away.

The next paragraphs skip forward to after Qiqiao's death. We see her daughter, Chang'an, now a middle-aged spinster—her mother having sabotaged every chance at marriage. Chang'an is walking down a street with a man, a vague acquaintance. He buys her a garter belt. That is all. The scene is rendered in flat, almost affectless prose. Nothing of consequence happens.

The effect is extraordinary. By refusing to extend the death scene, by denying us the catharsis of witnessing Qiqiao's final moments, Chang makes the preceding passage resonate backward through the entire narrative. We are not allowed to purge our emotion through tears; we must carry it. And the garter-belt scene, in its utter mundanity, becomes devastating precisely because it is not dramatic. This is what Qiqiao's life produced: not tragedy in the grand sense, but this—a lonely woman and a trivial gift, life continuing in its ordinary way, the world indifferent to suffering that felt, from inside, like the center of everything.

4. Chang, "The Golden Cangue."

The Technique Generalized

What can game designers learn from this? Not, I think, a formula to be mechanically applied, but a principle to be understood and adapted: *the moment of greatest feeling is often best served by withdrawal rather than insistence*.

Consider how most games handle character death. The music swells. Other characters gather to mourn. The dying character delivers final words, often at improbable length. The player is given time—sometimes forced, through unskippable cutscenes—to absorb the significance. Every formal element conspires to announce: *this matters, you should feel something*. And often we do feel something. But just as often, we feel the machinery of emotional manipulation, and our response is complicated by resistance.

Now consider an alternative approach, informed by Chang's technique. The death occurs. The music does not swell; perhaps it drops out entirely. Other characters do not gather for a ceremonial farewell. The game continues—there is another objective, another location to reach. The player must keep moving. The grief is not performed but carried, a weight that makes itself felt not in a single overwhelming scene but in the accumulating silence of a companion who no longer speaks, a skill tree that will never be completed, an empty slot in the party roster.

This is harder to execute than the conventional approach. It requires confidence that the preceding narrative has done its work, that the player's investment is real and does not need to be prompted. It requires a willingness to let players miss the emotional beat if they are not paying attention—to trust them rather than grab them by the collar. But when it works, it produces something the conventional approach cannot: emotion that belongs to the player rather than the game, feeling that arises from within rather than being imposed from without.

Anti-Climax in Practice: Two Examples

Chinese Paladin IV (*Xianjian Qixia Zhuan*, 2007) offers an instructive case—not of anti-climax in the strict sense, but of how experiential authenticity can transform conventional material. The game's central thematic statement, "My fate is mine, not heavenś"), runs throughout the narrative as a defiant assertion of individual will against cosmic forces. This could easily become empty sloganeering—the kind of inspirational slogan that sounds profound but costs nothing. What prevents this is the weight the game places on moments of genuine helplessness.

The most discussed such moment is the 'treehouse' scene. The antagonist Xuanxiao intends to sacrifice Han Lingsha to achieve his goal of ascension; Lingsha, learning this, concludes that suicide is preferable to forcing her friends to risk their lives fighting him on her behalf. She slips away to the treehouse—the place where the journey began, laden with memory—intending to end her life quietly. When Yuntianhe finds her, he cannot simply talk

her out of it. Her logic is coherent within its own terms: her death solves the problem, spares her friends, costs only herself. Yuntianhe's protests ("I will... I'll kill him!") ring hollow even to him; he is offering violence he may not be able to deliver against a threat he may not be able to overcome. The scene is painful precisely because both positions make sense, and neither offers a way out. Yuntianhe cannot save Lingsha by force of will; he can only stand with her in the impossibility of the situation.

This powerlessness resonates on multiple levels. Within the narrative, it establishes the stakes of the eventual heroism: when the characters do act decisively later, we understand what it costs them, because we have seen what it feels like to be unable to act at all. The formula "save the world" means something different when we have witnessed the protagonists fail to save one person from despair.

But the resonance extends beyond the narrative. The game was developed by Shanghai Softstar, a studio that faced significant pressures and uncertainties during and after the game's production—team restructuring, market shifts, corporate decisions beyond their control. One need not make a crude autobiographical claim to observe that the theme of individual will struggling against overwhelming external forces carries particular weight when the creators themselves were navigating such forces. The helplessness Yuntianhe feels in the treehouse scene reads, for players aware of this context, as something more than fictional contrivance. It reads as felt experience finding form.

This is what I mean by experiential intervention. The scene does not succeed because of technical virtuosity—the writing is competent but not extraordinary; the direction is effective but not innovative. It succeeds because the emotional content is genuinely inhabited. When Yuntianhe cannot help Lingsha, we sense that this impotence is not merely a plot device but something the makers understood from inside. The resulting heroism, when it comes, is not the triumphant assertion of will that the slogan "my fate is mine" might suggest, but something more costly and more human: the decision to act despite knowing that action may not be enough.

The Last of Us Part II (2020), though a very different game in a very different tradition, employs a related logic at the level of overall structure. The game's narrative is driven by revenge—the protagonist, Ellie, pursuing the woman who killed her surrogate father. The entire arc builds toward confrontation and, presumably, catharsis through violence. The player, conditioned by countless revenge narratives, expects the climax to deliver: the enemy defeated, justice served, closure achieved.

But when the final confrontation arrives, the game refuses the expected climax. The revenge is not consummated; or rather, its consummation is revealed as empty, incapable of providing what it promised. Ellie achieves her goal and finds it meaningless. The player, who has spent twenty-plus hours in pursuit of this moment, is denied the satisfaction of achieving it.

Many players found this infuriating—a betrayal of the implicit contract between game and player. Game studies has a term for friction between a game's systems and its story: ludonarrative dissonance, coined by Clint Hocking in 2007[5] to describe situations where mechanics and narrative pull in opposite directions. But *The Last of Us Part II* is not an instance of dissonance. The gameplay and the story are perfectly aligned; both build toward revenge, both promise catharsis. The betrayal is not that the game contradicts itself but that it *withholds*—deliberately, coherently, at every level of design. This is not accidental friction but intentional denial.

And the infuriation is, in a sense, the point. The game forces the player to sit with the emptiness that Ellie herself feels, to experience anticlimax not as narrative failure but as thematic statement. Revenge narratives typically end with the cathartic kill; *The Last of Us Part II* asks what happens after, when the adrenaline fades and you are left with what you have become. By refusing climax, it makes the absence of climax devastating.

These two examples operate differently. *Chinese Paladin IV* creates emotional weight through the authenticity of helplessness at a crucial moment; *The Last of Us Part II* creates it through structural refusal of expected satisfaction. But both demonstrate the same underlying principle: that the most powerful emotional moments in games often come not from amplification but from some form of withholding—withholding resolution, withholding the hero's competence, withholding the payoff the player has been trained to expect. In both cases, the player is left to complete something the game deliberately leaves unfinished. The feeling that results is not delivered but discovered.

Restraint as Respect

There is an ethical dimension to this, beyond the merely aesthetic. To insist on emotion is, in a sense, to distrust the audience. It assumes that feeling will not arise unless it is prompted, that significance must be underlined to be perceived. The anti-climactic approach, by contrast, respects the audience's capacity for independent response. It creates space for feeling rather than demanding it. The player who is moved by an understated scene is moved because they chose to be moved, because the feeling arose from their own engagement with the material. This is not a lesser emotion but a fuller one—owned rather than borrowed, discovered rather than delivered.

Games, more than any other narrative medium, depend on this kind of active participation. The player is not a passive recipient but a co-creator of the experience. To honor this co-creative relationship, the designer must sometimes step back, leaving room for the player to enter. The greatest emotional moments in games are often those that feel like

5. Clint Hocking, "Ludonarrative Dissonance in Bioshock," 2007, accessed December 1, 2025, https://clicknothing.typepad.com/click_nothing/2007/10/ludonarrative-d.html.

discoveries—things the player found rather than things the game showed them. Anti-climax is one technique for creating such moments: by withdrawing at the point of highest intensity, it invites the player to complete what the game leaves unfinished.

Eileen Chang, writing in 1940s Shanghai, could not have anticipated video games. But her narrative intelligence—her understanding of distance, of irony, of the power of what is withheld—speaks directly to the challenges game writers face today. In a medium prone to emotional inflation, her example counsels deflation. In a medium that often tells players what to feel, she reminds us that the deepest feelings are those we discover for ourselves.

IV. Polyphony and Synchronic Narrative

The Polyphonic Novel and Its Limits

In 1929, the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin published a study of Dostoevsky that would eventually reshape literary theory.[6] Bakhtin's central claim was that Dostoevsky had invented a new form of novel—the "polyphonic" novel—characterized by "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices." In earlier novels, characters existed to serve the author's vision; their perspectives were ultimately subordinated to a controlling authorial ideology. In Dostoevsky, by contrast, characters achieved genuine autonomy. Ivan Karamazov's atheism is not a straw man erected for Alyosha's faith to knock down; it is a fully inhabited position, argued with all the force Dostoevsky himself could muster. The author does not stand above the characters, judging and arranging; he stands among them, one voice in a chorus of voices.

Bakhtin's concept of polyphony has been enormously influential, but it carries a certain frustration. The polyphonic novel remains an ideal more than an achievement. Even in Dostoevsky, the author's hand is visible; even the most autonomous characters exist within a structure the author has designed. The novel, however radical, cannot escape its own mediating apparatus: the linear sequence of pages, the single voice of narration (even when that narration reports multiple perspectives), the author's ultimate control over what is shown and in what order. Polyphony in the novel is always, to some degree, a managed polyphony—voices arranged by an intelligence that transcends them.

What if there were a form that realized polyphony more fully? A form in which multiple voices existed simultaneously rather than sequentially, in which the reader's path through those voices was not fixed by authorial arrangement, in which characters persisted even when the reader's attention was elsewhere? I want to argue that the role-playing game, at its best, approaches this condition. Not because game designers are wiser than novelists, but

6. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*.

because the form itself—the way RPGs structure information and player movement—creates possibilities for polyphony that prose narrative cannot match.

From Diachronic to Synchronic

To understand this claim, we need a distinction between two modes of narrative organization: the diachronic and the synchronic.

Diachronic narrative unfolds through time in a fixed sequence. The reader or viewer encounters events in a specific order determined by the author. This is the mode of most storytelling: novels, films, oral tales. Even when a narrative employs flashbacks or fragmented chronology, the *experience* of the narrative remains sequential—page follows page, scene follows scene. The author controls not just what is shown but when it is shown.

Synchronic organization, by contrast, presents elements simultaneously. A painting exists all at once; the viewer may look at any part first, may move freely across the canvas, may attend to the whole or to details. There is no fixed sequence, no "before" and "after" built into the form itself. The artist controls what is present but not the order of encounter.

Most narrative media are predominantly diachronic. The novel must be read from beginning to end (one can skip ahead, but this is experienced as transgression, as "spoiling"). Film enforces sequence even more strictly: one cannot easily jump to an arbitrary point without mechanical intervention. Even hypertext fiction, despite its branching structure, presents each path as a sequence—one clicks through nodes in an order, even if that order varies between readings.

The RPG occupies a peculiar middle position. Its main plot is diachronic—one progresses through story beats in a sequence, unlocking new areas and events by completing prior ones. But surrounding this diachronic spine is a vast synchronic space: the world of NPCs, side quests, collectible texts, environmental details, item descriptions. This material exists "all at once" from the moment the player enters a given area. The player may speak to NPCs in any order, may read books before or after completing quests, may ignore entire categories of content or pursue them exhaustively. The designer controls what is available in a given space but not—or not fully—the order in which the player encounters it.

This synchronic dimension is often treated as secondary: "side content," "lore," "flavor." The main plot is the real narrative; everything else is optional enrichment. But I want to suggest that this hierarchy obscures something important. The synchronic content of an RPG is not merely supplementary to its narrative; it constitutes a distinct *mode* of narrative, one that realizes polyphony in ways the diachronic main plot cannot.

NPCs as Independent Voices

Consider the NPC—the non-player character, the populated background of any RPG world. In functional terms, NPCs exist to serve the player: they give quests, sell items, provide information. But in narrative terms, they can be much more. Each NPC, potentially, represents an independent perspective on the game's world—a voice that is not the protagonist's, not subordinated to the protagonist's goals, possessed of its own concerns and its own view of events.

In most games, this potential goes unrealized. NPCs deliver their functional lines and fall silent; they exist as furniture, not as consciousnesses. But some games take NPC voices seriously. The *Eiyū Densetsu* (*Legend of Heroes*) series, developed by the Japanese studio Nihon Falcom, is exemplary in this regard. In these games, every NPC in every town has a name, a personality, ongoing concerns, and—crucially—dialogue that updates as the main plot progresses. The baker worries about her son who has joined the army; over the course of the game, the son returns, or does not return, and the baker's dialogue reflects this. A pair of childhood friends navigate a slow-building romance across dozens of hours of gameplay, visible only to players who return to speak with them repeatedly.

None of this is "necessary." A player can complete the main plot without speaking to a single optional NPC. But for players who engage with this content, the effect is striking: the world feels populated by genuine others, people whose lives do not revolve around the protagonist. The baker's grief for her son is not a plot point; it will not be resolved by the player's heroics; it simply exists, one thread in a fabric of ongoing life. This is polyphony in Bakhtin's sense: independent voices, unmerged with the protagonist's perspective, pursuing their own ends.

The synchronic structure of the RPG makes this possible in ways that prose narrative cannot easily match. In a novel, every word is chosen by the author; every scene included displaces some other scene that might have been included. Economy is a constant pressure. The novelist who wished to give every minor character an independent voice would produce an unreadable doorstop—or would have to fragment the narrative so radically that coherence dissolves (as happens in some experimental fiction). The RPG, by contrast, can layer content without disrupting its main narrative. The player who wishes to follow the baker's story may do so; the player who does not may ignore it entirely. Both experiences are valid; neither requires the other.

Embedded Texts and Generic Multiplicity

The polyphonic potential of RPGs extends beyond NPC dialogue to encompass the various texts embedded within the game world: books, journals, letters, inscriptions, item descriptions. These embedded texts constitute what we might call generic multiplicity—the

coexistence of distinct discourse types within a single work.

A typical RPG might include: scholarly treatises on the world's history or magic; personal diaries revealing character interiority; official documents (decrees, contracts, wanted posters); religious or mythological texts; technical manuals; fiction within the fiction (novels or plays that characters in the game world might read). Each of these represents a different speech genre, a different mode of organizing language and thought. Their coexistence within the game world creates a textured sense of cultural depth—the feeling that this is a world with its own intellectual and literary traditions, not merely a backdrop for adventure.

Moreover, these embedded texts often offer perspectives that complicate or contradict the main narrative. A history book might present events the player has witnessed from a different angle; a diary might reveal that a character the player trusted was harboring doubts or resentments. The player who reads widely within the game world encounters a multi-perspectival reality, not a single authorized version of events.

This is, again, a form of polyphony. The scholarly treatise and the personal diary do not speak in the same voice; they represent different subject positions, different relationships to knowledge and authority. Their coexistence within the game does not resolve into a single message; it creates a space of dialogue, of competing accounts, of irreducible multiplicity.

Disco Elysium (2019) takes this principle to an extreme by internalizing it within the protagonist's psyche. The game's skill system—twenty-four distinct "skills" representing aspects of the player character's mind—functions as a chorus of internal voices. "Inland Empire" offers surreal, intuitive leaps; "Encyclopedia" provides factual context; "Authority" urges domination; "Empathy" attends to others' feelings. These voices comment on events, argue with each other, and sometimes take actions without the player's consent. The protagonist's mind becomes, quite literally, a polyphonic space: not a unified consciousness but a parliament of competing impulses, each with its own perspective and agenda.

The effect is disorienting and exhilarating. The player does not experience the game as a single character making choices but as a fractured self struggling to cohere. This is polyphony pushed to its logical extreme—not just multiple characters with independent voices, but a single character revealed as internally multiple, hosting a crowd.

The Flâneur in the Game World

Walter Benjamin, writing about Baudelaire and the arcades of nineteenth-century Paris, developed the figure of the *flâneur*: the urban stroller who moves through the city without fixed destination, attending to its surfaces and depths, open to encounter.[7] The flâneur is neither tourist nor resident; he belongs to the crowd but is not submerged in it. His mode of

7. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

attention is receptive rather than purposive—he does not seek particular things but allows himself to be struck by whatever the city offers.

I want to propose the flâneur as a figure for the player's relationship to polyphonic game worlds. The player moves through the game space not as a master surveying a domain but as a wanderer passing among voices. Each NPC, each embedded text, each environmental detail is a voice that may or may not be attended to. The player's path through this chorus is not random—it is shaped by game structures, by quests and objectives, by the geography of the world—but neither is it fully determined. There is agency in the attending: the choice to listen here, to pass by there, to return to a character whose earlier words have begun to resonate.

Benjamin's flâneur was also a reader of urban texts—shop signs, advertisements, architectural styles, the faces of passersby. The city offered itself as a semiotic field, dense with meaning for those who knew how to look. The polyphonic RPG offers something similar: a world saturated with texts, with fragments of story, with implications and suggestions that reward patient attention. The player who rushes through sees only the main plot; the player who lingers, who reads the books on the shelves, who returns to speak with NPCs after major events, encounters a richer and stranger world.

This figure of the flâneur captures something important about the RPG experience that other models miss. The player is not simply an author (as some game studies rhetoric would have it), writing their own story through choices. Nor is the player simply a reader, receiving a story prepared for them. The player is something more like Benjamin's urban wanderer: someone who moves through a space populated by others, encountering what they encounter, shaped by the journey but not in control of everything they meet.

The polyphony of the RPG is, in this sense, irreducibly plural. No single playthrough exhausts it; no player encounters all voices or hears all that might be heard. This is not a failure but a feature. The world exceeds the protagonist's experience of it, as worlds do. The voices that go unheard continue to exist, waiting for another wanderer who might attend to them.

Implications for Game Design

What follows from this analysis for the practice of game design? Not, I think, a formula, but a reorientation of attention.

First: the synchronic content of an RPG—its NPCs, its embedded texts, its environmental storytelling—is not mere "side content" to be filled in after the main plot is complete. It is a distinct narrative mode with its own aesthetic possibilities, possibilities that the main plot cannot realize. Designers who treat this content as secondary miss an opportunity; designers who invest in it seriously can create experiences of depth and immersion that no amount of

main-plot polish can match.

Second: polyphony requires genuine independence of voice. An NPC whose dialogue exists only to serve the player's needs is not a voice but an instrument. For NPCs to function polyphonically, they must have concerns that exceed their utility—must be, in some sense, ends in themselves. This is difficult to achieve at scale, and not every game needs to achieve it. But games that do achieve it create worlds that feel inhabited rather than decorated.

Third: the designer's role in a polyphonic game is not to control meaning but to create conditions for meaning to emerge. The designer populates the world, establishes the voices, sets them in relation—but cannot fully determine what the player will make of them. This requires a kind of authorial humility, a willingness to let the work exceed the maker's intentions. The polyphonic game is not a message delivered but a space opened.

Finally: polyphony is not the only valid mode of game narrative, nor is it appropriate to every game. Some games benefit from tight authorial control, from a single voice speaking clearly. The value of polyphony is not that it is superior but that it is *possible*—that games can do something novels and films cannot easily do, can realize a vision of narrative multiplicity that earlier forms could only approximate. To recognize this possibility is to take games seriously as a narrative form: not as deficient novels or fragmented films, but as something with its own affordances, its own excellences, its own contribution to the long history of human storytelling.

V. In Defense of Types

A certain strain of literary modernism—and the game criticism that inherits its assumptions—treats character types with suspicion. The type is seen as a failure of imagination: the grizzled mentor, the plucky sidekick, the villain with a tragic past. These figures recur because creators lack the skill or courage to invent something new. Serious art, on this view, requires characters who resist classification, who surprise us with their irreducible particularity. The type is a crutch; the goal is to throw it away.

I want to push back against this assumption—not to defend lazy writing, but to suggest that the relationship between type and particularity is more productive than the modernist suspicion allows.

Consider: a type is not merely a constraint but a *contract*. When a game introduces a character who fits a recognizable pattern—the loyal retainer, the trickster, the fallen paladin—it establishes expectations. The player knows, roughly, how this character will behave, what values they represent, what role they will play in the narrative economy. This knowledge is not a failure but a resource. It creates a baseline against which variation becomes meaningful.

The establishment of a paradigm means there is an opening to exploit. The type is not the endpoint but the starting point. Once a pattern is established, deviation from that pattern

carries weight. The mentor who betrays, the sidekick who surpasses the hero, the villain whose tragedy genuinely complicates our judgment—these variations land precisely because we know what was expected. Without the type, there is nothing to deviate from; without the norm, there is no subversion.

This is especially true in RPGs, where the sheer scale of the cast makes full individuation impossible. A game with dozens of party members and hundreds of NPCs cannot give each one the depth of a novel's protagonist. Types allow the designer to communicate quickly, to establish character with minimal exposition, to trust that the player will fill in what is implied. The type is a form of shorthand—and like all shorthand, it works because writer and reader share a common code.

The simplest method of exploiting the paradigm is element substitution: the demon lord becomes an ally; the greatsword-wielding warrior becomes a frail girl; the male protagonist responsible for physical damage retrains as the healer. Human types are so rich that any fixed type, however its elements are rearranged, can still yield a believable person. What matters is not escaping the type but working *through* it—knowing which elements to preserve, which to invert, which to complicate.

Contradiction, too, serves as a method. People are not always as they appear; what they want and what they do are more often at odds than in harmony. The violent person is often the one most easily touched by small kindnesses; the more destructive the impulse, the more sensitive and fragile the soul beneath. The poet dreaming of revenge often ends by destroying himself.

I return, one last time, to *Chinese Paladin IV*. Xuanxiao is perhaps the most memorable character I have encountered in years of playing RPGs. There is a detail I wonder if anyone remembers: after the final battle, Yuntianhe calls out "elder brother", and Xuanxiao's demeanor suddenly softens. What gratifies me is that this figure, depicted throughout as a man consumed by desire, driven step by step toward cruelty and madness, is not abstracted into a monolithic "battle spirit" who never yields. He remains capable of being reached. This, I think, demonstrates something important: typed characters can be real, and what we call "reality" is only typing with more detailed specifications.

The modernist suspicion of types often stems from a confusion between *formula* and *form*. Formula is the mechanical reproduction of pattern without investment—the character who exists only to fill a slot, whose type exhausts their meaning. Form is the deliberate use of pattern as a vehicle for meaning—the character whose type is a starting point, a set of expectations to be fulfilled or complicated or betrayed. The difference is not in the presence or absence of type but in the relationship between type and instance.

What I am arguing for, finally, is a kind of creative pragmatism. Types are tools. Like all tools, they can be used well or badly, with skill or without. The goal is not to transcend them—as if pure originality were possible or even desirable—but to use them with intention,

to understand what they offer and what they foreclose. The writer who knows the types can play with them, against them, through them. The writer who pretends types do not exist is simply blind to the patterns that shape their work regardless.

Games, with their vast casts and their need for quick legibility, have particular reason to take types seriously. This is not a limitation to be lamented but an affordance to be explored. The polyphonic richness I described earlier—the chorus of NPC voices, the layered embedded texts—depends in part on types to remain navigable. Without recognizable patterns, the abundance would be chaos. With them, it becomes a world.

VI. Coda: For a New Game

The title of this essay is borrowed—an homage to Alain Robbe-Grillet's *Pour un nouveau roman*, that manifesto for the French New Novel which argued, in the 1950s and 60s, that fiction must find new forms adequate to new realities.[8] Robbe-Grillet rejected the conventions of psychological realism, the omniscient narrator, the well-made plot. He wanted novels that attended to surfaces, that refused the comforting architectures of traditional storytelling, that made the reader work.

I admire Robbe-Grillet, and yet this essay has largely argued against the avant-garde suspicion of convention that his work represents. I have defended types, praised games that work within established patterns, counseled restraint rather than rupture. This might seem like a contradiction. It is not. What I take from Robbe-Grillet is not his specific prescriptions but his underlying conviction: that form matters, that how we tell stories shapes what stories can mean, that criticism and creation are not separate activities but aspects of a single engagement with the possibilities of art.

The question "are games art?" has always struck me as malformed. It assumes that "art" is a club with a velvet rope, that some cultural forms are inside and others outside, that games must prove their worthiness to enter. This assumption is tiresome and, at this point, irrelevant. Games have produced works of genuine aesthetic ambition and achievement. The question is not whether they belong but what they offer—what they can do that other forms cannot, what they add to the long human project of making meaning through made things.

I have tried, in these pages, to sketch some answers. Games can realize polyphony more fully than novels, allowing voices to coexist in synchronic space rather than diachronic sequence. They can create the conditions for emotional discovery rather than emotional delivery, trusting players to find what is not shown. They can use the player's investment—the hours, the choices, the accumulated attachment—as raw material for effects unavailable to passive media. They can build worlds that exceed any single traversal, that reward the

8. Alain Robbe-Grillet, *For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1965).

flâneur's patient attention, that persist in imagination after the screen goes dark.

None of this is automatic. Most games do not achieve these possibilities; most games are not trying to. The medium's commercial pressures, its development timelines, its dependence on technology that dates rapidly—all of these constrain what gets made. And yet. The works I have discussed in this essay—*Disco Elysium*, *Chinese Paladin IV*, *The Last of Us Part II*, the *Legend of Heroes* series—demonstrate that the constraints are not absolute. Within them, or against them, ambitious work remains possible.

I think of something Sartre wrote, in a very different context: "There is this in common between art and morality, that in both we have to do with creation and invention."[9] The game designer, like the novelist or the filmmaker, faces a blank possibility and must make choices that will constitute a world. Those choices are constrained by form, by budget, by the expectations of players, by the limits of the designer's own imagination. But within those constraints, there is freedom—the freedom to mean something, to offer an experience that matters, to add one more voice to the conversation that humans have been having with themselves since we first told stories around fires.

This essay began as something else: a set of notes written in Chinese, on a game forum, more than ten years ago. I was younger then, less read, more certain. Returning to those notes now, I find arguments I still believe and claims I would no longer make. The theoretical framework has grown more elaborate; the examples have changed as new games have appeared and old enthusiasms have faded. But something persists: the conviction that games deserve serious thought, that the tools of literary and cultural analysis can illuminate what they do, that criticism is not a tax levied on pleasure but a way of deepening it.

I do not know what games will look like in another ten years. The industry changes faster than criticism can track; the technology that seemed stable becomes obsolete; the audiences shift and fragment. But I suspect that the questions I have raised here—about authorship and distance, about polyphony and the player's role, about types and their subversion, about when to amplify and when to withhold—will remain relevant. These are not questions about particular platforms or engines. They are questions about how stories work, how meaning is made and found, how the irreducibly human activity of narrative adapts to new vessels.

For a new game, then. Not a specific title but a possibility: the game that has not yet been made, that will find new ways to realize what the form allows. I write toward that game, and for the players and makers who will bring it into being.

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9. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, trans. Carol Macomber (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

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