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The Heroes We Never Are

Interpellation, Subjugation, and the Encoded Other in Fantasy CRPGs

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! README !

A preface for game studies scholars, critics, RPG lovers, and anyone familiar with games and/or genre fiction

If you are reading these words, this thesis was either shared with you, or you somehow stumbled upon my git repository. Thanks for your interest!

Before proceeding, I wanted to situate this project and acknowledge aspects that might prove downright annoying. I wrote this thesis as part of an MA in Literature-Culture-Media, with a specialization in English lit. Neither my supervisor nor my examiner, both literature professors, know much about games *at all*. One of them kinda-sorta-totally dislikes fantasy, in fact. As such, I had to consider my audience. This means I included sentences and paragraphs that might feel very redundant to anyone who knows what "HP" and "MP" stand for. I am not being critical of my professors—they were genuinely supportive, and my supervisor repeatedly went out of his way to help me. I'm truly grateful a busy scholar specialized in Romantic poetry ended up watching a Let's Play of *Disco Elysium* for my sake. I'm even more surprised I received the highest grade, but this surprise has little to do with my work. I simply feared the worst from an institution ill-equipped to deal with a project not traditionally seen as "English Literature". As should be obvious by the time you reach the conclusion, I had bones to pick with academia, what counts as literature, classism, a couple of notable game studies scholars, capitalism, colonialism, and the games industry. When it comes to bigotry and hegemonic oppression, and as the *Refused* line goes, I had bones to break. If you've spent time in old-fashioned—or even conservative—academic spaces, you may understand all too well the dynamics I had to navigate.

What does that mean for you, reader? First, if some paragraphs feel like a chore to read then it's okay to skip them. These parts were probably not meant for you. Second, I had to make cuts all over the place. My department let me get away with an unusually high word count (again: grateful) but, ideally, this thesis would have easily blown past the 40,000-word mark. I hope you will see gaps and opportunities to build on what did end up here—and what did not. Third, if some of my arguments and claims do not convince you, then *that* is entirely on me. I believe readers should be aware of the conditions in which this work was carried out, but it was also my responsibility to work with (or against, or despite) these conditions. I'm always open to criticism and conversations, so please feel free to reach out.

My suggestion: read the introduction, then consider skipping to the section called "CRPGs, interpellation, and subjugation", on page 12. The background section primarily exists to give a sense of what RPGs are, and to highlight ideological concerns (essentialism, racism, sexism, etc.) that are nothing new to D&D players.

Thanks again for being here. I hope you'll enjoy the read.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my family for their love and support over the years. Thank you to my mom, Nicole, for believing in me and for working hard—too hard—to make sure my sister and I could have a life you never had. You made us feel like we had everything, even when we didn't have a roof over our heads. To my big sister, Sylvie, for always being there, and for the horror movies, games, comic books, and crepes. To my niece, Amelie, for being the coolest, most badass niece I could dream of. Let's make sure you are the second person in our family to graduate, yeah?

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Thank you to my supervisor, Cian Duffy, for his support, insights, and kindness. The best parts of this thesis are the result of Cian's guidance and suggestions. I cannot imagine what it takes to supervise a project such as this one and to do so in the middle of a pandemic. I can only say that future students will be lucky to have him by their sides. Thank you to Birgitta Berglund and Ellen Turner for their work and support, as well as Lund University's English Studies department. Thank you to Max Liljefors and Lund University's Visual Culture department. Thank you to my past professors as well: Henry King, Berndt Clavier, Asko Kaupinnen, Dimosthenis Chatzoglakis and Cecilia Björkén-Nyberg.

Recent events, both personal and global, shaped the writing of the thesis. I would like to express my support for victims and survivors of abuse, sexual assault, police brutality, and systemic oppression.

My respect, love, and unwavering solidarity to protesters, activists, hacktivists, scholars, artists, and communities across the world who fight not only for their survival, but for the survival of others as well. No gods, no masters.

Lastly, thank you to Talia Velez. I am very fond of you as well, Talia.

Abstract

This thesis explores the topic of interpellation and subjugation in fantasy computer role-playing games (CRPGs). Using an assemblage-based framework, I argue that CRPG players are hailed and manipulated by the interplay of several texts and dynamics—mainly prose, code, numerical values, rule sets, and mechanics. My research focuses on games with extensive textual narratives that match—or exceed—the length of popular fantasy novels. By analyzing the *Baldur's Gate* series, I call attention to deceitful forms of play commonly found in fantasy CRPGs. Interpellatory processes lead players to believe they are engaging in heroic performances and shaping the story, while imposing the enactment of encoded, violent ideologies and concealing the player's lack of agency. My analysis of *Pillars of Eternity 2: Deadfire* shows that non-playable characters (NPCs) are also constructed through multiple texts. NPCs are Othered, represented through hegemonic re-inscriptions, absolute properties, and de-individualized in order to justify their subjugation. Finally, my discussion of *Disco Elysium* asserts that fantasy CRPGs can eschew their oppressive conventions—including heroic figures—while retaining recognizable dynamics. In my discussion, I also consider the matters of genre, representation, texts across media—and highlight the politics of play in games, academic research, and beyond.

Keywords: literary studies; electronic literature; fantasy; game studies; role-playing games

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But it is one thing to read about dragons and another to meet them.

—Ursula K. Le Guin, *A Wizard of Earthsea*

Introduction

Pretend you are a hero.

As you make your way through a dungeon, you encounter a goblin—a short, green, bipedal creature—lurking in the shadows. You do not feel threatened. After all, you are wearing enchanted plate armor. The sword you wield is a powerful, legendary artifact crackling with electricity. You have defeated much stronger foes during your travels. As you come closer, the goblin lets out a defiant shriek and charges. The text box at the bottom of the screen informs you that the goblin said, 'Die, human.' You brandish your weapon and dispatch your opponent in a single slash. The goblin collapses. You rummage through the corpse and find twenty-eight gold coins, a lapis lazuli, a bow, and two flasks of goblin blood. You continue onward. Driven by more urgent concerns—dragons, an apocalyptic prophecy, an evil wizard—you never think about the goblin again. Later, after you have saved the world, you have entirely forgotten the creature's existence.

Yet Gruk—that was the goblin's name—did exist. In some ways, Gruk was clearly defined. They had sixteen points of health, zero points of mana, and the ability to attack once per round.[1] Their height, weight, and potential actions were all specified. Gruk, like all goblins, was inherently evil. In other ways, their identity was a blank slate: they had no age, never slept, ate, or conversed with clanmates. Gruk never moved until you appeared. There are questions you do not ask: how could the goblin carry a bow you never saw on the screen? Did they live in this dungeon, and why? Why carry two flasks of goblin blood? Was the lapis lazuli a family heirloom, perhaps? Why did they attack? These questions never haunt you because Gruk had a limited role to play—a role that vindicated your own. Maybe you were right to forget about the creature. There was not much to say, after all.

[1] Characters, unless gendered by a text, will be referred to using the neutral pronouns they/them.

The fantasy genre has undergone numerous transformations over the course of its existence. The 20th century alone has seen the rise of several subgenres, including the epic fantasy of J.R.R Tolkien, heroic fantasy and its swordplay-heavy tropes, or the horror-influenced mythoi of the New Weird. Since the late 1970s, and following the impact of *Dungeons & Dragons*, fantasy has also occupied an important place in the digital space—primarily via computer role-playing games (CRPGs). Remediated fantasy retains familiar traits, including worlding practices that embrace the unreal, and text-based narratives that are often as long as *The Lord of the Rings* or *A Song of Ice and Fire* series. Unlike literary fantasy, CRPGs revolve around rule-driven worlds and assign staggering amounts of numerical properties to lifeforms, objects, and cultures (Voorhees et al., "From Dungeons to Digital Denizens" 14-16). Identities arise from encodings, and are reduced to immutable, partial values in order to be played as—or played with. Concepts such as *good, heroic*, *woman,* or *charismatic* are defined through binaries and then stored in databases. Dominant ideologies and power structures inevitably shape these encodings, leading to assumptions and prejudiced claims about the Other (Hayles, *My Mother Was a Computer* 51). Rules and numbers structure game worlds, but they also serve a narrative purpose: the player's avatar, through repeated conflicts, inevitably becomes heroic by prevailing over other characters. Guided to victory by prose and computer code, players experience the diegesis through a machinic subjectivity that validates their actions—and conceals the forms of oppression depicted. In short, the Other is *subjugated*, and players are *interpellated* into enacting this subjugation.

There is an urgent need to consider how ludic spaces, and what they depict, are fashioned. Video games are not only the most popular form of entertainment in the world, but political artifacts that play with history, races, genders, sexualities, and re-inscribe or amplify hegemonic oppression (Andersen; Hammar; Ford). Fantasy is political as well, often embracing the fantastic and Otherness as "metaphor[s] for reality" (James and Mendlesohn 60). Goblins are rarely just goblins. A goblin could be an Arab person in the Middle East (shot by the player), a woman in near-future Paris (drained of her blood), or a bear wandering the woods (stabbed and skinned). Yet many game developers continue to claim their work is apolitical—as if these cultural texts were devoid of meaning beyond the spectacle provided (Tucker).

Scholars from multiple disciplines, including literary studies, have already shown the importance of engaging with video games. The essays in *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games* (2009) explore the material conditions of game-making and show how capitalist, imperialist, and colonialist beliefs are woven into the medium. Mary Flanagan's *Critical Play* (2009) retraces the history of play, from Victorian dolls used to subvert gender roles to the gamification of modern public spaces. Adrienne Shaw's work in *Gaming at the Edge* (2014) and the contributors to *Queer Game Studies* (2017) through feminist, posthuman, and queer readings, draw attention to the intricate formations of digital identities and how cultural embeddings impact marginalized groups. Finally, the essays in *Dungeons, Dragons, and Digital Denizens* (2012) remain a scholarly landmark when it comes to interdisciplinary considerations of role-playing games. Despite the genre's popularity, CRPGs remain critically under-discussed in game studies and beyond (Zagal and Deterding 12-14).

Using a framework based on the theories of N. Katherine Hayles and the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, my thesis demonstrates how interpellation and subjugation occur in fantasy CRPGs. More specifically, I show how the interactions between different texts and systems interpellate players into authored ways of playing, and how these interactions subjugate human and non-human actors by reproducing forms of hegemonic violence. Two research questions guide my project. First, how do CRPGs deceive players into performing encoded ideologies while claiming to offer multi-linear, heroic narratives? Second, how are fictional entities—especially those based upon, or inspired by, oppressed communities—re-objectified and subjugated? My research also considers issues related to the complex interplays between electronic texts, computation, genres, and media. My thesis will also present and respond to current theories concerning CRPGs.

My background section, which follows this introduction, develops the issues and topics mentioned so far, and familiarizes readers with the key terms, concepts, and critical theories relevant to my thesis. My analysis consists of three chapters. First, I examine the construction of the computational hero's journey and expose the interpellations to which players are subjected. This examination is carried out by discussing *Baldur's Gate*, a series that popularized and influenced the CRPG genre as a whole (Yin-Poole). The second chapter of my discussion turns towards depictions of

non-playable characters, cultures, and politics. As my reading of *Pillars of Eternity II: Deadfire* shows, subjugation occurs through alterity, Otherness, essentialist constructions of identities, and erasures deployed across code, rules, and language. In the third chapter, I subvert assumptions about CRPGs and consider other forms of fantasies and (role-)play. A close reading of *Disco Elysium* shows that interpellation and subjugation can be minimized by eschewing deterministic claims; letting players interpret fictional worlds; and playing with the inferences and gaps created by language. In my conclusion, I reflect on my findings, discuss opportunities for further research, and hint at what may be gained from playing in worlds without heroes.

A note on referencing, formatting, and style

I have formatted my thesis according to the guidelines found in the eighth edition of the MLA Handbook, but some changes have been made to prioritize the reader's experience. Since digital texts do not have standardized interfaces, strict adherence to the MLA style, or to any set style, can hinder readability. For example, MLA guidelines suggest indenting each new paragraph found in block quotations, but these indents make dialogues challenging to read. Similarly, the guidebook recommends pointing readers to a game's numbering system for in-text citations, but many games lack such markers.

Hence, when appropriate, I follow conventions established by the *Game Studies Journal* instead of MLA. The journal's house style will be familiar to academic readers since it borrows elements from the MLA, APA, Oxford, and Chicago style guides.[2] My Works Cited section has two sub-sections: a bibliography for critical texts, and a ludography for games and software. Instead of page or level numbers, linguistic signposts ensure readers know which game text is being discussed, and provide contextual details. Passing references to critical texts and games include a publication date which situates these references in relation to other games or academic research. Long quotations are indented, but I use line breaks (rather than paragraphs) to avoid intrusive indentations. Footnotes offer ancillary details, paratextual comments, and opportunities for further reading likely to benefit the reader. Occasionally, words are italicized. This form of signposting is used by N. Katherine Hayles, a literary critic whose work is central to this thesis—as described in the next section. Hayles has been writing about print literature, electronic texts, and computation since the 1980s. She uses italics to make key concepts or obscure terms stand out. I adopt a similar approach. An appendix, found on the last page, includes a glossary of uncommon terms and acronyms.

Finally, and since there is no easy way to access some of the digital material cited, I remain at the reader's disposal should they need screen captures, code excerpts, or links confirming that game texts were referenced accurately.

[2] The journal's guidelines can be found here: http://gamestudies.org/2002/submission_guidelines

Background

This background section has three primary purposes. First, it introduces key terms and concepts discussed in my thesis. Second, this section surveys the field of research and highlighting problems yet to be solved. Third, it establishes the academic and social relevance of this project.

Rather than provide a thorough history of fantasy, games, or computing, I show how these genres and forms are related, draw attention to remediations of ideological patterns, and call attention—sometimes by asking questions—to issues addressed in my discussion. I have chosen this approach to provide an accessible point of entry for readers unfamiliar with fantasy fiction or games while summarizing long-standing issues for readers versed in these topics. Additionally, several concepts relevant to my research are defined differently by various scholars—sometimes drastically so. Scholars, more often than not, "agree on what [they] disagree about" when it comes to role-playing games (Zagal and Deterding 19). The same is true of play (Flanagan 3–6), fantasy as a genre (James and Mendlesohn 64), or databases (Folsom 1573–75). These issues—of defining, framing, categorizing— are also one of the reasons this thesis exists.

Finally, the forms of fantasy considered here are limited to works first published in English and released in Europe, the U.S., and Canada. I aim to heed Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's words and "work against subalternity" (Kock 45). Thus, I focus on critiquing works that stem from nations with significant degrees of hegemonic power, as well as imperial and colonial pasts. In doing so, I hope to fashion discursive spaces for a variety of others by dismantling spaces occupied by dominant forces.

An overview of literary fantasy

Fantasy literature can be said to include works as diverse as *Beowulf*, the *Harry Potter* series, *The Metamorphosis, The Broken Earth* series*,* the *Conan* series, the *Discworld* series, or *Perdido Street Station.* How does one define a genre that spans centuries and media, has overlapped with other genres such as gothic horror and romantic poetry, and continues to evolve? What do *Le Morte d'Arthur*, *The Dispossessed,* and *A Game of Thrones* have in common? Some works can be distinguished based on material form,

others have been marketed using a variety of sub-genres, yet there "is no critical consensus" over the countless literary manifestations of fantasy (Clute and Grant 337). While the field's most renowned theorists disagree on several points, they ultimately "agree that fantasy is about the construction of the impossible" while "science fiction may be about the unlikely, but is grounded in the scientifically possible" (James and Mendlesohn I).

The notion of the impossible is worth exploring because of its implications concerning play and performance. Rosemary Jackson, in her consideration of the subversive potential of fantasy, pits the fantastic against the so-called *real* because the two exist in a "symbiotic relationship" (Jackson 15). The real, its material properties notwithstanding, is socially constructed by hegemonic forces. Thus, a genre that channels "the impossible" or "the un-real" places "a 'bourgeois' category of the real … under attack" (15). Adverse reactions to these destabilizing elements were noticeable in nineteenth-century England, where many critics and scholars were skeptical of the fantastic. The "dominant" mindset of the period deemed the genre "inappropriate for an age of science and morality", which may also explain why "the values of realism came to dominate literary discourse" (Wolfe 10-11). In challenging the mores and beliefs of the times, critics framed the fantastic as inferior to other art forms and genres.

Modern, English-language fantasy—from the late 1930s onwards—was popularized by J. R. R. Tolkien and, later, novelists such as Margaret Atwood, C. S. Lewis, J. K. Rowling, Samuel Delany, and George R. R. Martin (James 62–63). Throughout the 20th century, however, fantasy remained on the margins of critical discourse. As the genre's popularity grew, its "mass appeal" (H. Young 3) became one of the main reasons for scholars to dismiss it. This negative bias towards fantasy is worth pointing out for two reasons. First, the genre's history partly explains the current dearth of critical theories compared to other literary forms. Second, the other art forms discussed in this thesis—video games and RPGs—share eerily similar histories. All have been stigmatized, treated as irrelevant, or even deemed dangerous by certain groups. Beyond classist binaries such as the notions of low and high art, fantasy has been the target of censorship (Tunnell); RPGs (and *Dungeons & Dragons* in particular) were the cause of "moral panics" (Haberman); and various video games continue to be censored in some countries (Secker). It is worth noting that detractors, in condemning

fantasy and games, inevitably concede that these genres are socially significant and worth studying. There is no need for certain groups to censor discursive formations unless those texts are, politically and ideologically, potent enough to have an impact.

Fantasy literature has often been a space of resistance for marginalized voices. Writers such as Ursula Le Guin, China Miéville, or Nnedi Okorafor have crafted universes that embrace difference and radical visions of reality, challenging existing power structures in the process. That is not to say the genre is necessarily subversive or anti-authoritarian—quite the contrary. Beyond the bigoted tropes used by H.P. Lovecraft and Orson Scott Card, modern fantasy includes essentialist beliefs, colonial modes of thinking, selective erasures, and other forms of Othering (Rumsby). Tolkien's work, most noticeably, depicts a highly "hierarchical" universe that invokes "the medieval 'chain of being'" (Fimi) where some races and beliefs are superior to others. Furthermore, the identities found across Middle-Earth are not detached from the real world. Tolkien himself likened dwarves to Jewish people, and his frequent associations between blackness and evil—such as the racialization of orcs—are still debated to this day (Rearick 864). Due to the popularity of Tolkien's work, specific arrangements of unreality found in his novels have been emulated by mid-to-late twentieth-century fantasy writers. Many post-Tolkien fantasy tales also contain pseudo-medieval settings; set hierarchical structures; Chosen One or hero-centric narratives; various forms of warfare; familiar fictional races (such as elves, orcs, and dwarves) with essential properties; and reductionist constructions of race, identity, and culture which result in all members of a given race sharing identical beliefs and behaviors (H. Young 42–45).

To be clear, literary fantasy is too diverse to have strong conventions, and Tolkien's fiction does not represent the genre as a whole. However, as the next section shows, Tolkien's impact is substantial because his portrayal of ontological, cultural, and political structures shaped the genre of role-playing games.

Role-playing games and the politics of fantasy

A game, generally speaking, is a "system in which players engage in artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in quantifiable outcome" (Salen and Zimmerman 80). This definition is broad enough to include various games through history and across cultures.

Rules allow for *play* because they create "possibility spaces" (Bogost, *Persuasive Games* 42) where players perform freely while abiding by artificial boundaries. Play, as indicated earlier, is challenging to define, and will be used in this thesis to describe an activity that emerges from games and rules. Following Mary Flanagan, I see play as "a voluntary act" which is "separated from reality, either through a sanctioned play space or through an agreed upon fantasy or rule set" (5). Following Brian Sutton Smith, I use play to describe "a way of seeing and being, a special mental 'set' toward the world and one's actions in it" (174). Terms such as *performance* and *performativity*, unless otherwise specified, describe voluntary actions within the game space—understood as one's chosen way of reacting to the rules.

RPGs are a genre of game where players play as fictional characters. These games exist in multiple forms, including tabletop games (typically played around a table, not unlike board games) and video games. What distinguishes RPGs from "improvisational theater" is that role-play is enacted within "one stable continuous world where actions and their outcomes are structured and decided by explicit rules" (Zagal and Deterding 4). Regardless of rules and fictional settings, all RPGs have "a shared historical ancestor" (47), namely *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974). As the first commercially available RPG, two elements of *Dungeons & Dragons* influenced later entries in the genre. The first element, as mentioned, involves playing as a character within a fictional setting. The second element is that play occurs within a "*statistics-based* rule system" (Barton 22; emphasis added). Like fantasy literature, RPGs are too varied to define clearly. By using *Dungeons & Dragons* as an example—as I will do here—it is nonetheless possible to illustrate how many RPGs are played.

In *Dungeons & Dragons*, players immerse themselves in a shared game world and story, fight monsters, find items and equipment to enhance their characters, and complete quests. Quests are narrative set-ups based on fantasy tropes, such as defeating monsters terrorizing a local village, venturing into an undead-filled dungeon to recover an artifact, or killing a dragon. Character creation involves assigning attribute points and choosing traits that define a character's identity. Markers of identity include race, gender, class (one's role, such as wizard or warrior), or skills such as diplomacy, stealth, or sword-wielding. As characters overcome conflicts, they accumulate experience and skill points, which are used to enhance a character's attributes and abilities. Therefore,

characters become stronger as the game goes on, not unlike fantasy heroes who come from humble backgrounds and eventually save the world.

As an example, pretend you are a gnome wizard. You possess high intellect, low charisma, low strength, and you are familiar with magic spells. You've been asked to defeat a group of bandits who recently raided a local village. On your way to their hideout, a boulder blocks your path. You attempt to push it aside—but your strength is too low to succeed. Thankfully, due to your intellect, you study the boulder's surface and notice a small fissure. You step back, cast a spell, and shatter the stone. This success grants you five experience points, which is what you needed to unlock your next character level. Having *leveled up*, you can improve your attributes. What happens after that is your choice.

In the example above, the player could have chosen to return to the village for help; used a spell to levitate and fly past the rock; given up on the quest altogether; or countless other possibilities. Traditionally, this freedom of choice has been facilitated by a game master who acts as part-narrator, part-referee, and part-player. Sitting at a table, participants engage in oral, communal storytelling. Players perform as their characters and describe their actions. The game master describes events and places, speaks for non-playable characters, or plays as the enemies during combat sequences. Game masters simultaneously narrativize the rules and enforce rules in response to narrative acts. As a result, tabletop RPGs rely on a sort of co-authorship where choices and group interactions dramatically shape how the game unfolds.

When players express their wish to do something, the rules may be invoked. Opening the door to one's home would generally not be an issue, but actions such as 'I want to lie to the mayor' or 'I attack the enemy with my weapon' would be deemed conflictual.[3] In those instances, free-form narratives give way to rules through *skill checks*—comparisons between values. Just like player characters, non-human agents (non-playable characters, objects, spells, etc.) have numerical attributes and skills. Consequently, bargaining becomes a conflict between a customer's charisma and the

[3] Conflict does not have to be overt. Another way to understand conflictual in-game situations would be to ask, 'Is the intended task difficult to accomplish? Does it require a particular skill? Does the other entity challenge the move?'

merchant's charisma. Picking a lock requires measuring the lock's complexity against a character's dexterity, thievery, or locking skills. Skill checks come with an added element of randomness, such as rolling dice or drawing cards. These checks create tension: regardless of attributes, success is not guaranteed. However, rules limit randomness by restricting the number of cards drawn, or by stating which dice should be used. Randomness, then, is more akin to variance: a high number is still superior to a lower value because it is more likely to result in a desired outcome.

These quantitative properties result in countless instances of ideological valuing. When defined arithmetically, fictional entities become *equal, inferior, or superior* to others. For example, millions of orcs inhabit the world of *Dungeons & Dragons*, but their racial traits entail that they are all less intelligent than gnomes. Orcs also have a set moral alignment, defined as *chaotic evil*. The rule book claims alignments are a character's "unique view of the world, of right and wrong" (Noonan), but that is clearly not the case. In the early editions of the game, women—regardless of race—had lower strength scores than male characters.[4] Strategic wargames inspired the rule sets of *Dungeons & Dragons*, but Tolkien's novels and other works of literary fantasy profoundly influenced the game's fictional setting (MacLeod). As a result, *Dungeons & Dragons* amplifies structural patterns present in Tolkienesque fiction—hierarchy, essentialism, power and warfare, and heroism—and re-produces specific views of races, cultures, and genders. Playing an RPG involves "tak[ing] up an ideology located in some relation to the narrative and context surrounding it" (Voorhees et al. 16). Performances, although unique, are grounded in the definition, categorization, and hierarchization of various ontologies. Ideological biases permeate oral and textual narratives as much as they are embedded in a game's mechanics, rules, and other elements of play. The questions one may ask in response are as varied as the systems and settings that exist. What does it mean to be a woman according to some rule sets? Which properties of this simulated womanhood are encoded and available for play? What is erased or warped? How does one perform—and understand—womanhood in these contexts, and once play ends? Further questions may be asked along racial,

[4] In 2005, the co-creator of *Dungeons & Dragons* stated that he regrets implementing such a rule. However, his phrasing speaks volumes about his views of gender: "Why I decided on *realism* in regards to male/female strength is beyond me" (Gygax; emphasis added).

cultural, or sexual lines—among many others. The tensions between performances and systemic demands are discussed at length in the first chapter, and I address the ideological encodings and decodings of identity in my second chapter.

Play, in tabletop games, retains a noticeable amount of flexibility and ambiguity. Through conversations, groups of players may treat rules as "rulings" which are "considered suggestions or ideas that can be used or not" (Zagal and Deterding 458). In contrast, single-player video games replace communal exchanges with computation—which introduces significant problems.

CRPGs, interpellation, and subjugation

In computer role-playing games, a player creates and plays as a character in a fictional setting. Choices influence how characters develop and how the story unfolds. Player characters (PCs) converse with non-playable characters (NPCs), fight enemies, explore dungeons and other locales, gain experience and new abilities, acquire items, and traverse narratives that shift based on their decisions. In short, CRPGs remediate elements found in tabletop games. *Akalabeth: World of Doom* (1979), one of the earliest CRPGs, already "included many of the conventions that are present in even the most modern CRPG" (Barton 1).[5] As suggested in my introduction, my research is centered on story-driven, quest-based CRPGs. In other words, RPGs shaped like interactive fantasy novels where reading and responding to prose fiction is a necessary and substantial part of the experience. There is no agreed-upon term to define this specific form of CRPGs, and I will briefly return to this issue in my conclusion.

Single-player video games are played using a screen on which a digital interface is projected, and by using a keyboard and mouse (or a controller, or other input devices). In her pivotal work on digital storytelling, *Hamlet On The Holodeck,* Janet Murray states that digital environments have four unique properties: they are "procedural" (74), "participatory" (75), "spatial" (79), and "encyclopedic" (82). Procedurality refers to processes—tasks executed by a computer and based on machine-readable instructions (73). As computers interpret and execute code, they replicate the

[5] There is no consensus over what the first CRPG was. At best, the genre can be said to have emerged in the mid-1970s (Barton 1-3).

dynamics of tabletop RPGs by modeling "the game rules and game world" and enforcing "quantitative-probabilistic rule systems" (Zagal and Deterding 38–39). Digital environments are encyclopedic because worlds, entities, and rules are stored as data (on hard drives, disk, etc.) and selectively accessed. Spatiality allows users to navigate virtual spaces, such as walking through a bustling three-dimensional metropolis. Participation entails human-machine exchanges, which are generally enacted through inputs (i.e., the human validates a choice) and outputs (i.e., the computer responds.)

Building upon Murray's notion of procedurality, Ian Bogost asserts that video games engage in "procedural representation" (Bogost, *Persuasive Games* 35) and materialize images, sounds, and texts based on their underlying processes. These processes enable a certain amount of reactivity. Players may re-play a CRPG and, through different inputs, experience new permutations of the game that include previously unseen quests, paragraphs of prose, locales, or characters. As importantly, video games rely on "procedural rhetoric" which is "the practice of authoring arguments through processes". Like other forms of rhetoric, these arguments "make claims about *how things work*" (Bogost, *Persuasive Games* 28-29). Symbolic outputs echo a game's underlying logic, and lines of code may make statements about the diegesis or the real world. Procedural claims exist in many shapes, including rewards (experience points, items, money, etc.) and punishments (such as losing the game or incurring penalties due to certain actions.)

Procedural rhetoric is an integral part of video games. If a character jumps into a lake and dies, players will learn to avoid water. If a character dives into a body of water and begins swimming, players will see the world differently—a lake becomes something to explore rather than something to fear. Stated clearly, procedural rhetoric are expressions of programmed truths—binary states that reflect the underpinnings of the game world. If water is portrayed as harmful, and the game's code matches this representation, players can hardly disagree with the statement. One can respond to this truth by playing, but the claim itself cannot be invalidated. This example may seem innocuous, but worlding practices require close considerations when they establish indisputable truths about social, political, or ontological matters. How is our subjectivity distorted when we encounter a group, culture, or belief depicted as evil or savage? When faced with systematically imposed depictions of bodies and genders, what is there

to interpret, and how can players argue when another entity orchestrates the very act of speaking back? The question of genre is also germane. If fantasy, as introduced earlier, operates in relation to the real, then what happens when the genre administers its own rule-based reality?

Procedurality, encyclopedic properties, spatiality, and participatory elements are not substitutes for multiplayer interactions. Information storage is finite, and so is the amount of encyclopedic content (code, prose, visual and audio elements, or any other game data) created for the purpose of a single game. A game 'speaks' via text boxes, voice acting, and cut scenes, but the prose displayed on-screen has been structured prior to player input. The text box, found in countless CRPGs, is a critical part of the user interface. Readers may picture it as a rectangular box large enough to include multiple paragraphs of text—a digital page, frequently updated, where most of the reading takes place. Players, when allowed, respond to the game by picking from pools of pre-written choices located in the text box, or by interacting with other elements—such as clicking on a door to open it. Human-machines interactions are thus deferred and governed by code, with little room for negotiations.[6] Sarah Stang states that "many developers, marketers, players and scholars" wrongly assume that video games, because they are interactive, allow for "agency within the game" (Stang). Agency should be understood here as a form of co-authorship, the ability to contribute to the text or (re)shape its content. Instead, a video game is a "*faux scriptible* text" (Charles 289) that misleads readers into thinking their inputs can alter the text. This process creates a space of "interpretative passivity" and players, as they read and respond, find themselves "within a virtually invisible (and therefore virtually irresistible) ideological mould" (289). As a result, video games can behave as ideological apparatuses, and players risk being "interpellated by the dictatorship of the algorithm" (291). Alec Charles uses the term *interpellation* in the Althusserian sense: a subject submits to a dominant force, such as the State, while believing themselves to have agency (Sadjadi and Ahmadirad 205). The claims made by Stang and Charles are noteworthy because both theorists establish that audiences are, to varying degrees, indoctrinated into compliance by interactive

[6] Cheating, exploiting software bugs, hacking the code, reading game guides, talking with other players on social media, etc. are all potent forms of subversion. However, my primary concern in this thesis is with *diegetic* agency.

narratives. While I agree with these scholars, their research is not as detailed as it might be concerning how interpellation is *specifically* enacted in CRPGs. What unique strategies do CRPGs use to twist a player's subjectivity? How are such strategies enacted, and what makes them effective? I will return to these questions in the first chapter of my discussion.

Theory and methodology

In December 2019, an article titled "Uncivil Engineering: A Textual Divide in Game Studies" summed up current game scholarship in one sentence: "We are a house divided" (Finn and Aycock). Tracing a brief history of game studies, Patrick Finn and John Aycock emphasize the tensions between different critical strategies, and the work that remains to be done by scholars across multiple disciplines. The authors point out that "one of the richest streams in game studies is textual analysis" (Finn and Aycock), yet scholars disagree on *how* to analyze disparate formations—and what counts as a text. While prose is seen as textual, what of code, rules, and mechanics? Consequently, the authors ask: "how do we speak meaningfully about the *intersection of different kinds of text*?" (Finn and Aycock; emphasis added). An infamous dispute within game studies best exemplifies this textual divide: the narratology-ludology debate. Narratologists allegedly argued that games should be discussed through narratives, cultural elements, and representations. Ludologists—again, *allegedly*—believed that games should be studied in response to rules, code, and play elements. What each group stood for (and whether there were two groups at all) remains a thorny topic.[7] While I have no desire to resurrect a decade-old debate, the problem of investigating complex textual formations is important to mention for two reasons. First, because CRPGs rely—perhaps more than any other game genre—on a stunning number of narrative and ludic elements. Second, because complex ludo-textual arrangements have been debated in game studies, but past schisms have not coalesced into clear theoretical frameworks. Rather than isolate literary studies from game studies, I intend to bring different disciplines and texts in

[7] For further reading, see Vossen 223-239. The debate, as Emma Vossen highlights, included gatekeeping by male ludologists and personal attacks aimed at other scholars—mainly women. In the aftermath, some ludologists claimed the debate never happened, minimizing the harassment involved. Since Espen Aarseth, one of the field's most renowned figures, suggests that younger academics should avoid discussing "the war" ("Game Studies"), I believe it is important to do the exact opposite.

conversation with each other. My approach follows Gerald Voorhees' call for "agonistic" critical strategies ("Genre Troubles in Game Studies"), as well as T.L. Taylor's view of games and play as *assemblages*—a term to which I will return shortly. Taylor suggests the need to use interdisciplinary, inclusive methods to bring out "interrelation of the agents and processes" that shape play spaces, and the importance of analyzing "a circuit of relations that runs across a number of actors, human and non, conceptual and material" (Taylor). Since this thesis exists as part of an M.A. in Literature-Culture-Media with a specialization in English literature, and given my aims and concerns, a specific set of interrelations will be foregrounded. I will focus on narrative structures, prose, genres, computer code, processes, game mechanics, and rules. Other considerations influenced my research, including visual cultures, communal practices, embodiment, the politics of game-making, and the expressive affordances of computer hardware and software. When possible, opportunities for further reading will be suggested.

In an effort to focus on the interrelations of different texts, my theoretical framework is based on the work of N. Katherine Hayles, as well as the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Following Hayles, I envision human-machine interactions and play as a "cognitive assemblage", which is:

> an arrangement of systems, subsystems, and individual actors through which information flows, effecting transformations through the interpretive activities of cognizers operating upon the flows. A cognitive assemblage operates at multiple levels and sites, transforming and mutating as conditions and contexts change (*Unthought* 118)

Unlike ideals, things, or objects, assemblages are composed of fluctuating, detachable parts. Some parts perform cognitive roles in "responding to new situations, incorporating this knowledge into adaptive strategies, and evolving through experience to create new strategies and kinds of responses" (*Unthought* 118-119). Cognitive agents, called "cognizers", can be human or non-human. These cognizers, still according to Hayles, "make the decisions, selections, and interpretations that give the assemblage

flexibility, adaptability, and evolvability" ("Literary Texts as Cognitive Assemblages").[8] Computer systems will be referred to as "technical cognizers" (*Unthought* 136) or *machines*. Other aspects of Hayles' theories will be introduced as they become pertinent. In treating humans and computers as cognizers, this framework allows me to explore how these entities interact and interpret information, the operations they carry out, and the ways in which texts shift as a result. Information flows, also used by Deleuze and Guattari, are crucial as well. Although distinct flows, such as text and code, will be clearly labeled, flows will also be treated as entangled, fluid arrangements. In other words, my arguments will illustrate what various texts express when they interact or work in unison—however briefly—rather than attempt to define the ontological properties of texts.[9] Put succinctly, I am concerned with the stories human and technical cognizers tell each other, and the ways in which these stories are narrated.

Deleuze-Guattarian terms will be employed sparingly for a key reason: clarity and readability, regardless of the reader's background. Among the complications I hope to avoid, some words typically used in relation to technology—network, virtual, or machine—have unusual meanings in Deleuze and Guattari's work. Additionally, these authors have devised their own playfully chaotic, linguistic assemblages, and using one term often necessitates defining *other* terms. Still, my research was informed by Deleuze and Guattari's concerns with "machinic subjection" and readers/players being treated as disposable "component pieces" (Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter 78). Michel Foucault's introduction to *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* best summarizes what is at stake when matters of interpellation and subjugation are at play:

> [*Anti-Oedipus]* often leads one to believe it is all fun and games, when something essential is taking place, something of extreme seriousness: the tracking down of all varieties of fascism, from the enormous ones that surround and crush us to the petty ones that constitute the tyrannical bitterness of our everyday lives. (Foucault xiv)

[8] Unlike Hayles, who prefers "assemblages" over "networks" to describe interactions found "across complex three-dimensional topologies" (118), I will use both terms interchangeably.
[9] Several books by N. Katherine Hayles, most noticeably *My Mother Was a Computer* and *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* attend to the ontologies, dynamics, and politics of techno-linguistic meaning-making. For further reading, see Hayles.

As needed, unique terms and concepts will be brought into my discussion and defined. Elsewhere, Deleuze and Guattari's discursive "games and snares" (xiv) will be left out, and their strategies will operate like computer processes running discreetly in the background.

> *Code is not the enemy, any more than it is the savior. Rather code is increasingly positioned as language's pervasive partner. Implicit in the juxtaposition is the intermediation of human thought and machine intelligence, with all the dangers, possibilities, liberations, and complexities this implies.*
>
> —N. Katherines Hayles, *My Mother Was a Computer*

Chapter One
The Computational Hero's Journey

The *Baldur's Gate* series is "widely considered to be one of the progenitors" of the modern CRPG genre (Borde). The first *Baldur's Gate* game, released in 1998, arguably "saved the computer RPG", and much of its "original DNA" can be found in other CRPGs (Lindbergh).[10] With over one million words of prose, dozens of locations to explore, branching narrative paths, and a rule set based on *Dungeons & Dragons*, the series provides ample opportunities to explore issues related to play, performance, narratives, and machinic control. This chapter demonstrates how the interplays of prose and ludo-technical systems interpellate players by regulating the construction of the hero figure. Throughout my discussion, I highlight similarities between the *Baldur's Gate* series and other CRPGs to show that many of my assessments have implications beyond a single game series. Additionally, readers should note that the disparate elements which facilitate interpellation can rarely be isolated from each other. Parts of the cognitive assemblage will thus be (re-)considered from several angles to highlight their interpellatory roles. Given these returns and echoes, some readers may find it helpful to see my approach as one reminiscent of the hermeneutic circle. Others may prefer to see this chapter as an effort to discuss open-ended, unstable flows linearly despite their lack of unified linearity.

To begin, a brief summary of the series' overarching narrative may be helpful. The PC, an orphan, was raised by a mage named Gorion in the fortress of Candlekeep. One night, the older mage informs his ward they must leave the fortress abruptly. As the

[10] If the genre was saved, it is because 1990s Japanese RPGs (mainly played on consoles) were vastly more popular than CRPGs. Furthermore, there is no doubt *Baldur's Gate* was itself influenced by other games—including *Ultima* (1981) and *Wizardry* (1981). For further reading, see Barton.

protagonist and his adoptive father depart, they are ambushed by shadowy figures, and Gorion is killed.[11] Throughout the first *Baldur's Gate* (*BG1*), the Ward tracks down Gorion's killer and attempts to piece together their own identity. It is later revealed that the Ward is a Bhaalspawn—one of the many children sired by the dead god Bhaal. Gorion's death was part of a larger plot orchestrated by the hero's brother, another Bhaalspawn, in his quest to ascend to godhood. The first game ends with Gorion's Ward defeating their brother and saving the region known as the Sword Coast. Released in 2000, *Baldur's Gate 2* (*BG2*) builds upon these events, expands the lore around Bhaal and his offspring, and leads to the defeat of another villain. An expansion for *BG2*, *Throne of Bhaal* (2001), wraps up the Ward's journey as they vanquish other Bhaalspawns vying for their father's throne. By the end of the series, the Ward must make a final choice: become the new God of Murder, become a kind and righteous deity, or forsake godhood. The narrative's fixed moments echo Joseph Campbell's monomyth: a hero heeds a call to adventure, witnesses the death of a paternal/mentor figure, experiences trials, encounters allies and enemies, and overcomes challenges before being acknowledged as "the champion of things becoming" (Campbell 225). Within this pre-arranged—and generic—narrative lies a protean maze of choices and events that results in no two playthroughs being quite alike. Before its release, the first *Baldur's Gate* game was advertised as a "gripping non-linear adventure" where players could create their own hero and where their "decisions affect subsequent chapters and the entire game world as a whole" (MobyGames).

In order to understand how players are interpellated through play, a key issue needs to be addressed: namely, that concepts such as *narrative, hero*, *morality,* and *multi-linearity* have precise meanings for technical cognizers. According to Dennis Tenen, computers are "metaphor machines" (29) that generate signs without understanding them. But legibility does not entail reliability, and Tenen employs the term "transfiguration" to describe the conversion of technological flows into human-readable symbols. What occurs at the "site of storage" (the spaces of bits, instructions, and processes) is never signified at the "site of projection" (what is made readable and playable) (24). Tenen offers the example of users deleting files by dragging them to the

[11] Given that their name and gender can be customized, the hero figure will be referred to as 'the Ward' or 'the hero', and by using the pronouns they/them.

recycle bin, which clashes with the fact that computers do not have recycle bins, or even files (35-36).[12] When a file is deleted, the computer understands the command syntactically and ignores, in the process, the symbols projected. What is made available for reading is not what exists below; what is interpreted is not what is expressed. This brief example of computational poetics is central to our understanding of *Baldur's Gate* and other CRPGs because it connotes that each interactive part represented on-screen also exists in a syntactic form—including the hero figure. Accordingly, the fantasy narrative, as presented at the beginning of this chapter, is merely a player-centric view of this game series. Reading the inscriptions located at the site of storage reveals a buried syntax of heroism, and allows us to excavate the core elements driving the computational hero's journey. The Ward at the end of their journey differs from the Ward living in Candlekeep by having drastically higher numerical attributes; values signaling the Ward's reputation with numerous factions; and strings of code that reflect the areas visited and quests completed. In other words, the machine selectively chronicles the hero's growth, travels, and actions. One element, which remains identical from beginning to end, is worth highlighting: the Ward's moral alignment. These markers serve as lines of inquiry into how the hero figure fluctuates over time, but do not explain how these differences come about, or how the space of play is affected. Before discussing reputation, morality, and what the machine remembers about the Ward's actions, I will first focus on numerical attributes, and on the problematic interplays between syntactic power, symbolic power, and performativity.

Readers will recall that to speak of numbers is to speak, within the frame of a role-playing game, of power. High values influence one's ability, on the level of rules and code, to change the game state. On the level of interface, numbers create opportunities to arrange symbols (the projected story) in desired ways and within design limits. Still in the interface, numbers have distinct meanings that fit the game world. Power is depicted as financial (having enough gold coins to rest at an inn, or to purchase magic scrolls and potions), derived from material possessions (the armors and weapons one may equip), social (one's reputation or morality), and character-based (skills or

[12] Wendy Hui Kyong Chun used the recycle bin/files example (43-44) twelve years before Tenen's *Plain Text*. I point this out since Tenen is familiar with Chun's research and cites Chun, but not when he uses the example himself.

attributes like strength, dexterity, etc.). These depictions of power ultimately belong to the same computable network. For the machine, gold 'makes sense' insofar as it is connected to other encodings. The role of currency is to interact with (and be converted into) other values: received for completing a quest, exchanged for a piece of armor, or used to bribe an NPC. As part of the transfigurative process, computers radiate meanings beyond their interpretative capabilities—meanings players may, in fact, prioritize. A specific piece of equipment may be worn long after more resilient armor sets become available, simply because players find the outfit stylish. Aesthetics and personal preferences take precedence over rules and numerical values. However, and regardless of motives, the armor in question can only be obtained by performing machine-readable actions. Transfiguration creates a possibility space where the power to perform computationally meaningful actions and the power to engage in personally meaningful play overlap.

To an extent, power and performativity are linked in tabletop RPGs as well, but with two major differences. The first difference is the ability for the game masters to organically reward self-expression with experience points or new narrative paths. For example, the group's bard may devise a clever way to charm a hostile NPC, such as bursting into an improvised song to illustrate their avatar's move. In such cases, performativity does not require bending the rules: choices are an undefined response to rules.[13] The second difference regarding power and performances is the ability for players to express their intent prior to mechanics being invoked. Countless moves can be attempted, regardless of how unlikely or reckless they may seem—including charging headfirst into battle without weapons. Better attributes, as is the case in *Dungeons & Dragons*, increase the chances of success. *Baldur's Gate*, on the other hand, keeps agential leverage over players by deciding whether they can express themselves at all. This is not solely a problem of the text having a limited number of permutations due to technological constraints, but an issue of restricted access. For instance, during dialogue, some of the Ward's replies are locked due to insufficient attributes—the very act of speaking is denied until the necessary hoops have been

[13] The fifth edition of the *Dungeons & Dragons Player's Handbook* lists how much experience is needed to reach the next character level, and how much experience is gained from killing certain monsters (Crawford et al. 13). The values of countless other in-game actions are left undetermined.

jumped through. At times, the logic is understandable: if a clue needed to solve a murder has not been discovered, it would make little sense to offer dialogue choices that leverage the discovery. More often, however, the game engages in a double articulation. The first establishes a connection between one's body/mind and their expressive range. The second articulation comes in the form of a procedural claim, repeated over and over: if you, the player, had the required power, you could do and say more.

Of course, there is no guarantee that power necessarily leads to self-expression. Instead, the game hints at the *possibilities* granted by power. These possibilities saturate the site of projection, and the Ward exists across two temporalities: the hero as is and a hero *to come*. From character creation to end credits, the computational hero's journey is haunted by the ambiguous potentials of a future identity. This looming presence is palpable in the interface yet kept out of reach. Creating the Ward is an act of negotiation with the game's affordances. First, the hero's appearance must be chosen based on a restricted set of skin tones, hair types and styles, body types, genders, and other representational elements.[14] Then, a limited number of attributes and skill points must be allocated—all indicators of individuality. Systemic restrictions establish various lacks, to which players respond by creating a stop-gap identity to be improved or refined later—a deferred becoming. These lacks are then underlined during play. For example, a low-level mage's spell book is mostly blank. Yet the grimoire's pages can already be turned, revealing unused spaces where powerful invocations could one day be stored. Fighters, wearing tattered leather clothing, may cross path with NPCs wearing full sets of resplendent chainmail armor. Merchants in the larger cities offer wares that cost thousands of gold coins even though quest rewards, early on, amount to copper and silver pieces. Powerful weapons are not always wieldable at once, and the Ward may need additional points of strength in order to unlock an artifact's properties. The future hero is re-inscribed whenever a skill check fails, an attribute restricts inputs, or an area of the world is inaccessible.

[14] Under affordances, I include technological constraints and other untraceable elements that shape potential identities—design choices, cultural influences, financial concerns, the developers' backgrounds, etc. For example, a game engine may be able to depict dreadlocks, but was the option included and, if not, why?

Diegetic expressions and computational restrictions are often discussed in terms of "hard rails" and "soft rails" (Squire and Jenkins). Hard rails are non-negotiable game play elements such as quests that bar progress unless completed, or unavoidable dialogues and fights. Soft rails include the ability to select some skills over others, making moves during combat, or the chance to ignore (or undertake) a quest. Rather than focus on railroading, Adele H. Bealer's eco-critical approach stresses the need to consider the "virtual gamescape" which "emerges *between* the linear, goal-directed narrative of the game and the episodic performances that traverse it" (35, emphasis added). Both critical strategies have their benefits, but noticeable issues as well. The hard/soft rails dyad cannot account for performances which may be as narratively meaningful for players as 'set' narrative threads; the virtual gamescape lacks the linearity and the sense of compulsory, restricted movements implied by metaphoric rails. Regardless of how the diegesis is navigated, all traversals lead to the same destination: the materialization of the hero. As a result, the game world consists of unreliable topographies with varying degrees of smoothness and striation. Processes of striation create "walls, enclosures, and roads between enclosures" (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* 381), understood as flows that guide, push towards, and restrict performances. Processes of smoothness lack overt codification, and they invite heterogenous, unregulated actions by creating spaces where "a number is no longer a means of counting or measuring but of moving" (389). Smoothness and striation are forces *and* spatial arrangements: they co-exist, and one may define its surroundings more noticeably than the other. Their co-existence is highly unstable since each force can re-shape a space at any point: cement can be poured over greenery, but weeds may eventually slink through the cracks. Smoothness can also be weaponized and used as a lure towards striation. As Tauel Harper suggests, the striated is "defined by general, universalizable rules which act to capture and direct energy towards an instrumental end" (140). The undetermined parts of the Ward's identity—customizable skills, empty spell books—are smooth since they allow for variation, but these parts are soon counter-acted and re-defined by the world's striation. More importantly, spatial dynamics conceal a larger striation: identity construction, regardless of specifics, is an accumulation of diegetic power. With each new skill, attribute, or piece of armor acquired, the Ward grows stronger.

Can players refuse define the hero on machinic terms and thus reject these dynamics? At best, only briefly. Since the Ward at the end of *Throne of Bhaal* has the opportunity to become a deity, the game series needs to separate heroes from common mortals. There is no way to complete the *Baldur's Gate* series—in other words, to turn the text's final page—without gradually mythologizing the Ward through power.[15] Experience, items, and monetary rewards are handed out for advancing through the story but, most noticeably, progress is power-gated. In many instances, the rules immure players in chapters or areas until certain tasks are completed. Towards the end of *BG2*'s first chapter, the Ward's half-sister, Imoen, casts a spell and, in doing so, breaks local laws. She is promptly taken away by a group of wizards tasked with preventing illegal uses of magic. In the second chapter, the Ward must plot Imoen's rescue and devise a way to reach the prison of Spellhold. Saving Imoen has a prerequisite: gathering 20,000 gold pieces (or, after a successful bargain, 15,000 gold pieces) to hire the Shadow Thieves, an organization of spies and assassins. Whether the money is handed over to the thieves is optional, but earning the required sum is not. That amount of gold, early on, can only be obtained by undertaking quests across the city of Athkatla. Each finished quest also rewards experience points. By the time the Ward has amassed the money needed, they are also, statistically-speaking, stronger—and thus more heroic. Espen Aarseth, in his discussion of cybertexts, establishes the term "ergodic literature" to describe texts where "nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text" (*Cybertexts* 1).[16] Moreover, Aarseth sees readers of 'traditional' literary texts, in being relegated to interpreters, as "powerless" (4) due to their inability to shape the text's organization. Yet players who wish to experience *Baldur's Gate*'s denouement have no say when it comes to the game's multimodal construction of power. CRPGs may differ in their settings, stories mechanics, and rules, but they are all narratives built around a limited understanding of heroism. The genre sees heroes as characters who accumulate strength until they can impose their vision on

[15] Some dedicated players do complete 'level one runs' in *BG1*, which means they finish the game by refusing to click the 'level up' button, but these runs do power in the form of items, armors, and weapons. Additionally, *BG2* imposes a minimum level during character creation—making level one runs impossible.

[16] To clarify, Aarseth is not minimizing the complexities of reading novels and short stories. 'Effort' is to be understood as "extranoematics responsibilities" (2), such as navigating hyperlinks, providing specific series of inputs to unlock a text, or using a controller.

the world and its inhabitants. That vision is not the player's, but the system's—regardless of what a game claims.

Narratively, embracing power does not ensure that human inputs will affect the story—even if the *Baldur's Gate* series allows for a non-negligible amount of permutations. At the beginning of *BG1* and prior to Gorion's murder, a hungover Candlekeep guard asks the Ward to bring back a quarrel of crossbow bolts. The quest is straightforward and, upon returning the bolts, the hero is compensated. With 16 (or less) points of charisma, the Ward receives a paltry amount of gold. With at least 17 points of charisma, they receive a dagger, and the dialogue is slightly more congratulatory. Hundreds of similarly reactive moments exist and make choices feel meaningful. But to what extent do these actions matter in relation to the larger story? Some choices are substantial enough to intersect with the plot, as is the case with Imoen's disappearance. Having obtained the thousands of gold pieces mentioned earlier, players can recruit the Shadow Thieves, or they can help a vampiric coterie overthrow the Shadow Thieves instead. Siding with either group acts as a "reward of access" (Gazzard) that opens up new areas, such as the thieves' den. Spatial unlocking entails spatial locking: attempting to interact with the vampires after helping the Shadow Thieves will only lead to bloodshed. Yet neither path drastically changes the hero's journey and, beyond this narrative fork, all versions of the Ward board the same ship and sail towards the island of Brynnlaw. This example is one among many others where players are shepherded back to the intended narrative. What is more, *Baldur's Gate* occasionally minimizes or discards inputs even though these inputs were depicted as important and involved clear choices. The personal quest of an NPC companion called Keldorn, a human paladin, illustrate these erasures. After traveling by the hero's side for a while, Keldorn mentions that his wife and two daughters reside in the city of Athkatla. When asked about his family, the grizzled holy warrior's reply comes in the form of indirect speech that fills the text box:

> A seasoned veteran with the scars to prove it, Keldorn speaks wistfully of retirement in the future and the opportunity to spend more time with his family. Upon their mention, however, Keldorn's attention wanders and grows grim. Duty is more important than personal considerations, he whispers harshly, so long as the Order has need of him.

Should players wish, the Ward and Keldorn can visit the paladin's estate. Upon arriving, Keldorn discovers that his wife, Lady Maria, has found a paramour. Keldorn, occupied by his holy duties, has been away for several years and has thus neglected his partner as well as their children. After a tense exchange between the couple, a quest is offered: Keldorn asks for the Ward's help in resolving the matter. One path, if religious authorities are called upon, ends with Lady Maria's imprisonment and her lover's hanging. A second choice leads Keldorn to confront Sir William—the lover—which results in Sir William chastising Keldorn for being an awful husband and absentee father. Subsequently, Keldorn may request permission to leave the party. The Ward may accept, refuse, or grant the paladin a single day with his loved ones before returning by the Ward's side. When encouraged to leave, Keldorn abandons a journey filled with gods and monsters and heads home to save his marriage.

Upon completing the game, each companion is given an epilogue in the form of scrolling paragraphs of prose. Despite the choices mentioned, Keldorn's epilogue is always the same. The paladin is eventually summoned by his order once more and, following a battle, succumbs to his wounds. The text is vague enough to account for all narrative arrangements and states that, prior to his final call, Keldorn "retired to Athkatla, hoping to live in as much peace as an old warrior can expect". No mention is made of when Keldorn retired, when the order summoned him, whether Lady Maria died in prison, if the couple reconciliated, the daughters' fates, or whether the paladin murdered Sir William in cold blood. The Ward's interactions with Keldorn, how much time the paladin shared with the hero, the obstacles they surmounted, and many other facets of the projected story are left out as well. As indicated in my summary of *Baldur's Gate*'s narrative, the game's final decision cements the Ward's relationship to godhood: embracing goodness, evil, or walking away from both. But even killing Keldorn, which is possible, does not prevent one's ascension to benevolent divinity. Should the paladin perish during the adventure, his epilogue is omitted—as if he never existed—and a narrative voice mythologizes the Ward: "Through friends and enemies, you have conquered your heritage, turning shadow to light". There is no indication that player choices mattered at all beyond the notion that *something* has been conquered, and that goodness somehow prevailed. Granted, choices are significant in that they are experienced, and regardless of whether they are epilogized. Indeed, such moments allow

for reader response, and for players to reminisce about their actions and the text itself. But the omissions brought up here are important: they provide a sense of how some games interpret flows, hint at how stories are inscribed, and establish who has the final say at the site of projection. Systems may create the impression of accepting inputs but later dismiss or distort them, which means that human actors can be treated as *flickering cognizers*.[17] Recalling Hayles' definition, cognizers affect other parts of the assemblage by deciding, selecting, and interpreting. Human cognizers flicker whenever their ability to decide and select is jeopardized, and when the machine imposes agential corruption or disconnection. Disconnection is abrupt (such as being forced to listen to a conversation between two characters), but corruption may unfold over many hours and narrative threads. When performances diverge from systemic logic (e.g., a 'good' soon-to-be-deity murdering a 'good' companion), the information can be erased. In the case of Keldorn, and regardless of the dozens of hours preceding the epilogue, the game will canonize its own version of the tale, and its depiction of morality over the player's.

The unreliable construction of morality plays a significant role when it comes to interpellation. Systems of ethics—often implemented as morality and/or reputation—are staples of contemporary CRPGs. The most popular series (*Fallout, Baldur's Gate, The Elder Scrolls, Dragon Age*, and others) all incorporate some kinds of moral scales. The *Fallout* series has a Karma system (Knoll), the *Elder Scrolls* games rely on Fame and Infamy (Brown et al.), and the *Dragon Age* series tracks PC-NPC dynamics through the Approval system (Jørgensen). Although simulated ethics supposedly foster immersion, these systems mainly act as regulatory structures which produce a false sense of control and reify diegetic violence. The interplay between morality, interactivity, and multi-linearity creates spaces where disciplinary measures enforce the machine's subjectivity. This subjectivity, fabricated by depicting the Ward as a moral agent, excuses the machine's demands and the players' actions. In *Baldur's Gate*, two gameplay mechanics contribute to this deception: alignment (one's moral values) and reputation (the Ward and their companions' fame or infamy). As part of character creation, players must decide the Ward's alignment—ranging from lawful good to chaotic evil—before

[17] Hayles does state that cognizers can "drop in and out" of the assemblage ("Literary Texts as Cognitive Assemblages" 2–3), but she does not dwell on instances of imposed disconnections. I introduce the term *flickering cognizers* to describe such instances, and as a play on Hayles' concept of "flickering signifiers" (*How We Became Posthuman* 25–50)

choosing a class. The system exposes its striated nature by showing incompatibilities between certain alignments and classes. For example, one cannot play as a chaotic evil paladin, a lawful berserker, or a lawful good thief. Through these restrictions, morality is presented as meaningful since it governs future movements. Ideologies unfold through assumptions: laws can be broken, and there are such things as good or evil. If paladins cannot be chaotic evil, then they must be good, and thievery is a criminal (but not always evil) act. NPC companions are also bound to morality. Their alignments affect their likelihood of helping the Ward, and companions may argue or fight among themselves when their principles differ. Even though these dynamics suggest complex systems of ethics, a key point is that morality is a fixed concept. Although in-game characters occasionally react to alignments, neither PC nor NPCs gradually become good or evil—they *inherently* are.[18] To put it another way, morality is assigned (or imposed) rather than performed. This absolutism is problematic given that mythic figures, in literature, are transformed by their adventures, and heroes undergo changes which may be "mental, moral, emotional, spiritual, physical, [and/or] motivational" (Allison et al.). In being superior to others, heroes are hierarchical constructs, but they are nonetheless sites of external and internal alterations. *Baldur's Gate*'s hero is essential in other ways: envisioned as a powerful entity, always capable of saving the world, and the embodiment of a pre-defined morality. Yet, as exemplified by the example of Keldorn, morality is a highly contradictory element which, at times, has no bearing on the diegesis. An absolute for players, but not for the machine—a point to which I return later in this chapter.

Reputation, unlike morality, does allow for frequent variations and responds to human inputs. Certain actions will increase the party's standing (e.g., helping people in need) while others will lower it (e.g., killing civilians). A high reputation is beneficial: villagers greet the Ward and their companions warmly, merchants offer discounts, and some NPCs will commend the Ward for their past actions. Low reputation adventurers are shunned and may be attacked by city guards. These mechanics make sense in relation to the fictional setting: holy warriors such as paladins should avoid hurting

[18] There are some exceptions, including one magical item (the "Helm of Opposite Alignment"), and companions whose alignments change due to certain quests. However, only three out twenty-five companions are affected.

innocent beings, and helping a community should make its members more welcoming. But making sense is the point: diegetic logic works alongside encodings and punitive structures to bring about intended heroisms. A 'good' character will generally receive more gold and experience than one who refuses to help others, making the game world easier to traverse and giving players a larger performative spectrum. As Paul Ralph and Kafui Monu point out, "bipolar morality scales discourage complex moral reasoning", "undermine immersion" and "discourage roleplay" (10). Indeed, once procedural expressions convey that certain behaviors are rewarded, some players may eschew roleplay (or their own moral values) in favor of beneficial performances—such as saving an NPC in hopes of payment. More recent CRPGs such as *Mass Effect 3* (2012) or *Tyranny* (2016) include systems where acting amorally is also rewarded. An 'evil' character may thus receive a powerful weapon just like a 'good' hero, and the differences between the two rewards lie in the item's appearance or properties. However, these implementations are still subordinate to set moral ideals which push the would-be hero (or anti-hero) towards pre-approved and alluring ways of being (anti-)heroic.

However, I disagree with Ralph and Monu's assertion that "morality scales … *inevitably* lead to conflicts between players' ethical analyses and morality mechanics" (11, emphasis added). On the contrary, processes and textual formations minimize the player's critical faculties and their chances to question the text. Granted, many scholars agree that games contain instances of "ludonarrative dissonance" where "the discourse conveyed through a game's story and environment contradicts the discourse underlying its gameplay" (Seraphine 3). Yet *Baldur's Gate* attenuates disharmonious flows by rewriting its own history and reconfiguring pre-established concepts. Beyond ludonarrative dissonances, I would suggest the existence of *systemic collusions* where procedural and representational formations collude and claim to make sense. A dissonance, to be noticed, must stand out and disrupt established connections between narrative and gameplay. Systemic collusions are different: they are dissonances normalized through repetition. For example, in another CRPG called *Dragon Age: Origins (2009)*, the graphics engine can simulate blood spatters. Consequently, the hero's armor, after a gruesome battle, ends up covered in blood and viscera. Should the hero walk into a town afterwards, not a single NPC will mention these details. A blood-

drenched knight can have a casual conversation about pacifism as if nothing were amiss. The scene may seem dissonant—at first. But after dozens of hours of play, the machine has made clear that visual depictions of blood and other traces of violence do not matter. This logic is enforced by compartmentalizing texts, and by ensuring that certain flows do not interact with (or comment on) others.

Systemic collusions are pervasive because they permeate play, and they contribute to interpellation by normalizing the fiction's *projected* logic. In this thesis's first pages, I invited readers to imagine a goblin—Gruk—who only exists for the hero's sake. One of my reasons for doing so was to highlight that *Baldur's Gate's* computational morality makes no overt claims when the hero murders goblins. These silences and mitigations are not neutral, but gaps that expose various ideological strata. The lack of penalty incurred when killing monsters—precisely because they are monstrous—is one of the most common forms of (un)claiming found in CRPGs. The same absence of consequence applies to attacking animals (unless they have been tamed or summoned), insects, orcs, undead, kobolds, and other non-human agents. While the *Baldur's Gate* series occasionally rationalizes the fates of its characters (e.g. orcs should be killed because they threaten a village), hegemonic ideologies are at their most insidious when no justificatory frame is erected. In his discussion of *Neverwinter Nights 2* (2006), Andrew Baerg asserts that CRPGs teach players to become "*homo economicus* when it comes to quest completion" (165) since these games create "social relations and morality only discernible through numbers" (166). Baerg is correct in pointing out that neo-liberal, capitalistic ideologies are embedded into the fabric of these worlds. To kill, to maximize the worth of encounters, and to do as one is told is a matter of profits. But if players learn to see violent encounters as beneficial, it is because virtual morality goes beyond numbers: rules, processes, and human-readable signs work in unison to declare that morality is rational. Killing certain beings, in short, is encouraged by mobilizing various parts of the assemblage. On the level of rules and scripts, monstrous entities will attack adventurers on sight. In the case of goblins, their own morality is encoded as neutral evil—indeed, like orcs, not a single 'good' goblin inhabits the world of *Baldur's Gate*. Although many hostile monsters are capable of speech, they rarely utter more than war cries, taunts, growls, and screams. When killed, enemies provide experience as well as money or equipment. Corpses exist ephemerally

and only until they are looted. Then, background processes swiftly usher away the hundreds of syphoned cadavers left behind by heroes. Racism, specism, and essentialism will be discussed at length in my second chapter, but such value-driven, ontological dynamics must be explored here because they are commonplace in CRPGs. The territories of ludic fantasy overflow with a "garbagification" (R. A. Young 67) of ontologies.[19] The hero's growth demands a salvaging of the Others who exist on the margins of striated society. These disposable beings dwell in remote "rubbish heaps" (69) through which mythical figures can rummage. The woods, caves, tombs, dens, and dungeons monsters call home are segregated from the spaces of civilization where morality supposedly matters. This split is strategic: salvageable heaps are always within reach and, in some cases, players can teleport (or *fast-travel*) to these locations with a couple of mouse clicks. Is it any surprise then, that these entities can be referred to as "trash mobs" (Kuhn 27)? 'Mob' stands for mobile objects—hostile NPCs who roam a designated area. 'Trash' has multiple implications: these entities are narratively insignificant, easy to defeat, and—unlike end-level bosses or major enemies—yield low quality/common items.

Garbage heaps are spaces of moral smoothness where PCs are not explicitly judged for their actions. Yet striation fills these spaces as well. The absence of moralizing feedback is another ideological embedding because the systems' utterances matter just as much as what is unsaid. As enemies collapse, a unique clinking sound follows their deaths—gold and items hitting the ground. When that sound does not resonate, there is no need to wait before moving on to the next prey. Moreover, sparing monsters is disadvantageous since it leads to missing out on experience points and the performative possibilities insinuated by diegetic power. In consequence, fantasy CRPGs drive players towards pre-inscribed forms of violence because a murderous hero—who slays the game's designated targets—will end up statistically superior to a pacifist one. Some CRPGs even include spaces where monstrous entities *respawn*, which means that an area is eventually repopulated by the same kind of NPCs. Heroes may return to the same forest and *grind* or *farm* a goblin encampment, now a site of never-ending experience and riches, to become powerful. Granted, the unique ways in which CRPGs

[19] Richard A. Young uses the term *garbagification* as part of a larger discussion about oppressive state politics and dehumanizing processes found in several Latin American countries.

depict morality must be considered on a case-by-case basis. But regardless of individual instantiations, diegetic morality is a conditioning process which is always in conversation, even via silences, with other agents in the assemblage. Morality is whatever the game affirms it is at a given time, and morphs to ensure that intended forms of play are not questioned. Since heroes are embodiments of power, and power is needed to complete their epic journeys, the Other is suitably Othered in order to be exploited. Defeating the arch-villain and winning surely matters more than the hundreds of (evil, meaningless, monstrous) lives sacrificed in the process—does it not?

In this chapter, I have shown how *Baldur's Gate* interpellates players, repeatedly hails them, and twists their subjectivity while creating the illusion of agency. Interpellation is established via several processes and dynamics which largely work in harmony: computationally enforced enactments of power, performativity, and ethics; ludic and narrative coercions and erasures; and the imposition of a machinic subjectivity which—depending on context—normalizes, moralizes, or dismisses a player's actions and movements. Before turning towards the role of the Other, I believe it is important to consider the types of stories the genre, as it has been traditionally articulated, can tell. Beyond fantasy as a setting or as an aesthetic, or relying on vague terms such as interactive stories or interactive literature, CRPGs like *Baldur's Gate* are stories written through an incredibly narrow lens. Chris Crawford suggests that games can be critiqued through their verbs, which is to say by reflecting on what players can (or must) do in relation to game objects (100–101). Lists of verbs draw attention to a game world's core dynamics. Verb-based critiques may thus show that two games, while dissimilar on the surface, revolve around "running, jumping, climbing, [and] shooting" (136). By adopting Crawford's strategy, *Baldur's Gate* can be read as a game built around navigating (virtual spaces, textual elements, etc.), fighting (and killing), accumulating (power, in various forms), and selecting**.** Some of these actions are obligatory (fighting, accumulating) and others, such as selecting, may be restricted or later altered by the game's code. Consequently, the syntax of CRPGs precludes the telling of countless fantasy tales.

Novels and short stories can hardly be abstracted to verbs because they depict and are interpreted rather than acted out. Syntactic abstraction would require focalizing on a character, chapter, or setting—and still fail to illustrate the layers of meaning-

making involved. Even when read syntactically, how could the stories of Ursula K. Le Guin be made into a CRPG? In her own words, Le Guin did not "write about battles or wars at all", pushed back against "morally simplistic, black-and-white" constructions of good and evil, and castigated readings of *The Lord of the Rings* infatuated with the trilogy's "violent action and interminable battles" rather than the novels' subtleties (Le Guin). Literary works, when adapted as games, either magnify conflicts or erase them. One example, *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015), involves killing hordes of NPCs—a stark contrast to Andrzej Sapkowski's *The Witcher* short stories where the protagonist is likely to spare "peaceful and intelligent" creatures (Lobato). Terry Pratchett's *Discworld* series, and other works of fantasy with infrequent depictions of combat, end up adapted as adventure games (interactive narratives with puzzle-like elements) rather than CRPGs. These examples are not grievances against adaptations, or an attempt to privilege the source material. What is striking is the apparent unwillingness of game developers (or the financial entities funding game development) to let go of the genre's dungeon-crawling, monster-bashing roots.

Finally, and if contemporary CRPGs can be read through their verbs, then it should be remembered that the audience must utter those verbs. Given the ideological charges discussed so far, it is worth considering whether one would read a fantasy novel—or any novel—if, every few pages, the reader was forced to act out the murder of other beings to unlock the next chapter.

Who can—or wants to—claim a perfectly pure, legible identity that can be fully expressed by a decision tree designed by a corporation?

—Lisa Nakamura, *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet*

Chapter Two
Usable Identities and the Violence of Ludic Representation

The previous chapter illustrated how *Baldur's Gate* interpellates players into pre-ordained and ideologically charged performances. Although inexorably woven into this illustration, NPCs and Otherness were de-centered to foreground the complex dynamics between human and technical cognizers. Yet depictions of Otherness are crucial to my thesis because subjugation is my main ideological concern. Interpellation is a method; subjugation is the outcome—an end state which elevates one party while denying another's agency. Rather than center the heroic subject further, this second chapter speaks of identities who are often spoken for, rendered unspeakable, or conveniently ignored. Echoing Spivak once again, I intend to "work *for* the bloody subaltern" (Kock 46) and for the Other by questioning the roles they (are made to) play.[20]

To illustrate the issues involved here, as well as the ways in which hegemonic beliefs and values are continually re-inscribed into virtual beings, I now turn towards the politics, identities, and cultures at the heart of *Pillars of Eternity 2: Deadfire* (*PoE2*). Although *PoE2*'s hero's journey is yet another fantasy epic that culminates in a confrontation with a godlike entity, the narrative requires dealing with the colonial politics of the Deadfire archipelago. Three colonial powers threaten the Huana, a tribal confederation of indigenous people. To begin with, the Vailian Trading Company, an alliance of traders reminiscent of the East India Company, has set its eyes on the Deadfire's resources.[21] Secondly, the Royal Deadfire Company, a naval and mercantile

[20] Spivak's words, when contextualized, are even sharper: "Who the hell wants to protect subalternity? Only extremely reactionary, dubious anthropologistic museumizers. No activist wants to keep the subaltern in the space of difference … You don't give the subaltern voice. You work *for* the bloody subaltern, you work against subalternity" (Kock 46).

[21] The Vailian Trading Company is supported financially and politically by the five ruling Grand Ducs of the Vailian Empire, and (unofficially) furthers the empire's interests while evading international treaties. (Obsidian Entertainment, *Pillars of Eternity Guidebook: Volume Two. The Deadfire Archipelago* 47–50).

arm of the Rauatai empire, aims to take over the archipelago and claim it in the name of their nation. Finally, the Principi sen Patrena is a coalition of pirates which has been raiding the Huana for some time, targeting company ships near trade routes, and whose swashbuckling members wish to uphold their way of life. The PC may support any of the four factions. Thus, siding with the Huana will result in the tribes repelling the invaders, but joining the Vailian Trading Company or the Royal Deadfire Company will lead to the archipelago's colonization. Since these factions are represented by fictional characters, I will first address an important question: what makes a person, or an identity, in *PoE2*?

An NPC is always a manifestation of the encoded Other—a fractional identity deployed for envisioned purposes. Since meaning construction in games entails "selectively modelling [the] appropriate elements" (Klabbers) of a given world, then identities and cultures are constructed tactically. The strategies used vary from game to game, but two core elements shape the identities of NPCs. First, NPCs exist to enrich the player's experience. Second, NPC's identities and range of actions are scripted to fit the roles they play. As Henrik Warpefelt states, "NPCs take on many different roles" which, in order be fulfilled, require a "display of the intended simulacratude" (Warpefelt 28–29). Based on these roles, a clear subject-object split exists, and the object's fictional life is defined by the subject's expected needs. Merchants are there to supply goods, and the main antagonist should be a challenging foe driven by motives that validate the hero's journey. The subject's needs are a certainty: interactions with in-game characters—whether companions, enemies, or shopkeepers—are needed to progress through the story. Accordingly, merchants are unlikely to have backstories or rich personalities unless those elements lead to quests or actionable gameplay loops. Unique interpretative elements such as accents, attires, or physical features, form a layer that permits interaction and conceals a character's utilitarian nature. Identity is often a function, or a justification for functionality, rather than an expression.

This functionality is best exemplified by considering the sprawling city of Neketaka, and home to the Huana. Dozens of characters wander the city's streets in predictable ways: they remain confined to certain districts, sporadically roam adjacent alleys, await inside their homes, or stand behind their counters although no customer, other than the hero, will purchase their wares. When players press the keyboard's tab

key, the user interface decodes their surroundings. Glowing selection circles appear beneath the feet of Neketaka's residents, divulging a character's hostility (a red circle) or friendliness (a blue circle) towards the hero. In addition, nameplates appear above some NPCs' heads. These nameplates make it clear that two broad ontologies exist: generic NPCs, and unique NPCs. Characters with names such as "pirate", "crown guard", or "mataru warrior" have a few lines of looping dialogue. These characters may comment on the weather, current events, or greet the hero before skipping back to an earlier statement. Their names only appear after pressing tab *and* hovering the mouse cursor over their character model. Furthermore, these characters share their limited pools of utterances with all similarly named entities. Thus, a kuaru artisan found in the marketplace is—barring some minor cosmetic variations—the same as any other kuaru artisan in other parts of the city.[22]

Uniquely named NPCs, on the other hand, are labeled as such to exhibit their practical worth: quest givers, plot critical characters, companions yet to be hired, or skill trainers. These NPCs' nameplates appear after pressing the tab key—no need to use the mouse cursor or talk to them at all. Identities can be assessed in advance, and Otherness is established without meeting the Other. The user interface acts as a framing device and sets up a metatextual discourse which leads players to build an a priori repository of knowledge. This information differs from a *dramatis personae* since it is spread across the text and continuously updated to match what is being read—more surveillance apparatus than referential paratext. At the press of a button, it becomes possible to name every single denizen of Nekataka, assuming they have names at all, and gauge their current thoughts about the hero. This knowledge, internalized through a machinic gaze consisting of geometric shapes, colors, and nameplates, makes non-playable characters (in)visible by bringing some to the forefront while suppressing others. Donna Haraway uses the term "god trick" to describe instances of technologically enhanced visions, from x-rays to security cameras, that allow humans to "see everything from nowhere"

[22] Duplicating entities is seen as one of the benefits of object-oriented programming—a paradigm which organizes data around *objects* and their *functions*. This allow coders to create 'primary' identities, which can then be copy-pasted to quickly populate entire worlds. Modelling (turning a person into code) is thus an act of collating commonalities and pushing individuality out into manageable, optional spaces. Differences between entities are an addition rather than a starting point. For further reading, see Hayles, *My Mother Was A Computer* 50-55.

(581). God-like heroes, in CRPGs, all benefit from this trick—as if knowing and seeing at will were parts of the mythic repertoire. Through an overlay that highlights as much as it erases, the game becomes a pre-interpreted text: its reading cannot be separated from signs pointing toward the parts worth reading. The player's subjectivity is warped to focus on risk and reward, and the Other is always met accordingly.

Machinic vision is not a deception, but a reflection of computational truth-making and the depths to which alterity pervades this virtual world. De-individualized identities exist as interplays of difference, homogeneity, and repetition. Thus, the xaurip (a race of small reptilian humanoids) are mainly encountered as nameless sub-types under a shared racial umbrella. A tribe is populated not by people, but by classes such as "xaurip archer", "xaurip blighter", or "xaurip champion". Classes differ at the level of attributes (e.g. champions are statistically stronger than archers), how they behave in combat, and their appearances. When they exist as functions rather than characters, NPCs can easily be perceived as pawns or theatrical props. The boundaries of their illusory identities can be made explicit through "unplaying", which Mary Flanagan defines as playing "in opposition to an acceptable or expected [script]" (33). In *PoE2*, it is possible to *unplay* by simply observing the xaurip. This is achieved by staying out of these NPCs' range of vision so they do not attack, and waiting for time to pass.[23] Doing so reveals that groups of xaurip will simply stand still for months (or years) without a word uttered, a meal shared, or any noticeable expressive acts. Their unlives, laid bare, reveal that they are no different from *Baldur's Gate*'s garbagified goblins. Even without being fought or killed, these NPCs' lack of textuality—which could hint at interiority and selfhood—is violent in itself, an act of "rendering a person unspeakable" (Butler and Athanasiou 133) which facilitates bio- and necropolitical encounters. When a xaurip dies, what is there to think or say? At best, there is a satisfaction in the experience, items, or currency gained. But how does one bear witness, dwell upon, or eulogize a self that never was? What separates this archer from the ones that came before? In being unspeakable, a xaurip (and indeed, every de-individualized 'monster') is unmournable. In being duplicated, they are disposable. The Other's identity enables the

[23] *PoE2* simulates the passage of time, has a consultable calendar, and allows the player to sleep as needed. It is therefore possible to repeatedly rest for several hours and, as a result, 'fast forward' through the game's temporality.

materialization of their inscribed purpose, which is then justified and (re-)enacted through scripted PC-NPC interactions. The game does cultivate the notion of NPCs as subjects, but only enough for them to be readable. Accordingly, the construction of an NPC's identity expresses a hegemonic, colonial logic which "produces the colonized as a fixed reality which is at once an 'other' and yet entirely knowable and visible" (Bhabha 23). Fixity is especially noticeable for NPCs with numerical attributes and a thin symbolic layer. In those cases, their roles may obscure what they supposedly represent, but their semiotic surface never entirely vanishes.

Yet for game theorists like Espen Aarserth, representations either do not matter, or matter very little. Aarseth believes that games have a clear three-part structure: "rules", "a material/semiotic system (a gameworld)", and "gameplay (the events resulting from application of the rules to the gameworld)" ("Genre Trouble" 47–48). Thus rules and gameplay are necessary, but specific implementations of the semiotic layer are not. Representations can be switched around since "games are *eminently* themeable" and a game of chess, for instance, can be played using "some rocks in the mud" ("Genre Trouble" 48; emphasis added). Aarseth's claims should be disputed on theoretical and ideological grounds. Would chess truly be the same game regardless of theme? Rather than two armies led by monarchs, what if the black pieces stood for French military forces and white pieces stood for the Algerian Liberation Front? Or, borrowing from current events, what if the black pieces stood for Black Lives Matter protesters and white pieces stood for members of law enforcement? The same logic, as well as more harrowing examples, could be applied to *PoE2* and other CRPGs—all that is needed is replacing goblins and xaurip with a marginalized, real-world identity. Games can be themed *to a degree*: chess boards and pieces can be crafted from numerous materials, and they may have unique design features. But the symbolic, regardless of its entanglements with underlying rules, is never inconsequential.[24]

Returning to the xaurip, one of the most noticeable (and rare) instances of individuality is the encounter with Mother Sharp-Rock, a xaurip imprisoned by her own

[24] Espen Aarseth borrows the chess example from Jesper Juul, another prominent game studies scholar. Juul later reversed his stance and stated, "video games are a set of rules as well as a fictional world" (11) and "rules themselves create fiction" (25). Indeed, the design of a chess piece is not accidental, and pawns being less mobile than horse-mounted knights is one example of how rules and semiotics interact.

kind. The PC crosses paths with Mother Sharp-Rock after killing a tribe of generically named xaurip in a nondescript cave. Approaching her invokes the following text:

> From between the bars stares a frail and sickly xaurip. It shrinks when you near, pressing itself into the furthest corner of its cage, trembling. Around its neck are the remnants of a bedraggled feather crest. Paint is smeared across its face, but the paint is old, flaking. It hasn't been reapplied in some time. The xaurip's regalia suggests they may have been an important figure in the tribe—perhaps a High Priest, or a Mother—but its condition makes clear that those days are long past.

Mother Sharp-Rock's name, at this point, is only accessible by highlighting the world with the tab key. The text hints at gendered roles within xaurip society (High Priest or Mother) without clarifying which applies to this NPC, or whether these titles are similar in function and rank. Textual markers of identity are unstable, and Mother Sharp-Rock is an "it" as well as a "they"—two neutral pronouns with different implications. The first pronoun refers, in the diegesis, to most non-humanoid or non-sentient creatures. 'They' is scarcer and reserved for entities such as Berath—the shape-shifting deity of doors and death. In addition, bypassing the interface and opening *PoE2*'s data files reveals that this xaurip is indeed (encoded as) female.[25]

At this point, Mother Sharp-Rock is more construct than person—a thing defined by conflictual contours rather than content. The player's situatedness reinforces this tension: the encounter with Mother Sharp-Rock comes in the wake of killing dozens, if not hundreds of de-individualized xaurip. There is no way to understand her, or her species, beyond what little has been provided: a lore entry in the bestiary, to which I will return, and past confrontations with other xaurip. Yet, it is important to realize that what the system insinuates about Mother Sharp-Rock is far from meaningless. Procedural representations, like colonial discourse, imbue Otherness with "an ambivalence that creates fissures that allow for the disavowal of the stereotyping discourse" (Calleros-Villarreal 102). Mother Sharp-Rock's wavering identity generates fissures that expand in countless directions. Conversing with her establishes that xaurip

[25] Mother Sharp-Rock, in the code, is called "CRW_Sharp_Rock" or "CHA_00_Crew_Sharp_Rock". Reading—a term which I use cautiously—the xaurip's gender is achieved by using a text editor to open the relevant files.

have names; genders; ranges of emotions; a concept of motherhood; internal strife and divergent beliefs; political structures; and a sense of law and punishments, including imprisonment. These fissures hint towards the possibility of the xaurip as a people, but fissuring is not undoing, nor is it decolonizing. Fissures expose the fallacies of colonial attitudes but, in this case, re-inscribe another form of patriarchal coloniality: a speechless, potentially female tribal figure, shown as vulnerable and in need of rescuing by the hero.

Freeing Mother Sharp-Rock from the cage leads to a short exchange which complicates the matter further:

> "Who locked you up?"
> *The xaurip scuttles behind you and grabs hold of your leg. It points across the cave to the corpse of a large, well-adorned xaurip, one of their champions, and scowls.*
>
> "Why are you following me?"
> *The xaurip tilts its head slowly and blinks. It narrows its eyes, like it can't quite figure out what you mean. It glances back at the cage you freed it from, then stares at you expectantly.*
>
> "Do you always follow your leader around?"
> *The xaurip clings tightly to your leg and refuses to let go.*
>
> "You want to come with me?"
> *It stares up at you, unblinking, and finally releases your leg. When you make no move to chase it away, it hops up and down excitedly.*

This exchange confirms the thingification of Mother Sharp-Rock through the pronoun "it". The text can then unfold in two ways: the player may leave her in the cave (by then, the other xaurip's corpses may have disappeared), or agree to have her join the

hero's naval crew.[26] It is only by recruiting Mother Sharp-Rock that the pronoun "she" emerges. In becoming a character on the player's terms, her identity stabilizes. This act of making concrete is problematic because this NPC's gender is only canonized once she becomes useful, and only called upon during minor, randomly generated events. Once aboard the hero's vessel, she becomes another and *an Other* shipmate who consumes food and water but, unlike other deckhands, shows no interest in being paid for her labor. Between prison bars and ship deck, Mother Sharp-Rock is not freed but merely re-ordered from quest giver to crew member—which is to say, re-instrumentalized. Beyond the confines of the hero's ship, no other xaurip is individualized for the rest of the adventure, and players may resume decimating them.

Rather than being exceptional, the example of Mother Sharp-Rock and the xaurip reflects a wider "ethnic mapping" all too common in the fantasy genre. Fantasy worlds "are often grounded in allegory and stereotype which project real-world bigotry onto fantasy races" (Monson 52). This grounding is established through the ability to glean "instant insight into [a race's] essential nature", amplified by "giving fictional races recognizable cultural traits associated with real-world race groups," and by drawing a "connection of goodness with being light skinned and western European and evil with being dark skinned and African, Asian, or Middle Eastern" (55).[27] Essentialist mappings are particularly vivid in *PoE2's* bestiary, a compendium of fictional beings which is accessed through the user interface. In the bestiary, NPCs are listed by broad ontologies, including "beasts", "spirits" (elementals and wraiths), "vessels" (undead and golems), and "wilders" (ogres, trolls, and xaurip). Each category is then divided by race, and each race has sub-headings and drop-down menus that itemize its members by classes—another manifestation of the groupings suggested by name plates. The bestiary pushes the Other's knowability further: clicking on "Skeletal Archer" brings up their level, attributes, immunities, weaknesses, and abilities. At the very bottom of each page, concise paragraphs of prose allude to a given race's history. It is worth stressing that engaging with the bestiary is mandatory: no experience points are granted for killing an enemy unless their race or class has been catalogued. The information needed to

[26] *PoE2* lets the player sail between islands using a ship, which can be customized and crewed by hiring NPCs.

[27] Problematic racial and gender mappings are prevalent in literary fantasy and science-fiction. For further reading, see Haslam, as well as Young, H.

populate these entries is not gathered by reading, or talking, or exploring, but by killing the beings in question. Bestiary entries make slaughter easier as well: each profile reveals an enemy's weaknesses (e.g., trolls hate fire) which can be leveraged to inflict violence more efficiently. Once an ontology is documented, no unknowing occurs. Bats, wisps, spectres, ogres, variations of the monstrous and bestial are all encased ontologically and temporally. To know one entity is to know entire genera and species as they were, are, and will be. By perusing the bestiary, a clear schema of identity emerges: all creatures are mapped using the same data points and attributes. Thus intellect is assessed similarly between spiders, panthers, or revenants, even though revenants are undead whose minds are "thoroughly rotted" and who operate "at the basest level of instinct" since they "have no memory" (Fenstermaker).

One important category is left out of this archive: the kith, who are the game's "civilized" races and, more damningly, the playable races (Obsidian Entertainment, *Pillars of Eternity Guidebook: Volume One* 10). What makes the kith civilized is never addressed, nor is the matter of what makes other entities uncivilized—given that many are depicted as having cultures and languages. The playable races' features connote, at first, an implicit anthropocentrism that elevates bipedal, recognizably sentient beings. Humans are "the most abundant" race and "they run the middle of the road when it comes to physical prowesses—stronger than orlans, weaker than aumaua" (44). The human body is a baseline of normalcy against which the Other is measured, but this universality is also an act of erasure since all body types are subsumed into absolute racial constructs. Furthermore, notions of anthropocentrism must be complicated since *PoE2* normalizes elves and dwarves as well. This normalization may surprise some readers, but elves and dwarves have been part of fantasy and pop culture for decades—and part of mythologies and folk tales for centuries. As if mirroring this extradiegetic familiarity, dwarves are relocated from subterranean kingdoms to cities and colonies (40). Elves, the second most populous race, also live in colonies or distant—but not necessarily isolationist—realms (41-42). Humans, elves, and dwarves are common in technologically or magically advanced nations, and they inhabit colonies *as colonizers*—not as colonized groups.

The unfamiliar kith, on the other hand, are defined by their blatantly non-human traits. Non-humanness is then narrativized—and magnified—through real-world

allusions to non-hegemonic cultures.[28] The aumaua are large semi-aquatic humanoids with webbed hands and feet, and their appearance is based upon "Japanese and various Polynesian cultures" (Sawyer). This sweeping gesture towards a chimerical East does not acknowledge the heterogeneity and radical differences among those groups and identities. Instead, the aumaua are defined by a cavalcade of cross-continental, orientalist stereotypes: tattoos, dreadlocks, spears, huts, temples, torches, an affinity for the natural world, etc. The nocturnal orlan have large, protruding ears, sizeable fangs, and fur covers their hobbit-like bodies. Their tribal societies, when conducting warfare, rely on "guerrilla tactics including heavy use of traps and poison" (Obsidian Entertainment, *Pillars of Eternity Guidebook: Volume One* 45). Finally, the godlike are the offspring of any kith coupling, and they are born with traits inherited from various gods. Regardless of their lineage, the godlike are treated as a distinct race due to their inhuman features. A godlike, depending on deity, may have flowers and fungi sprouting from their flesh, feathers and talons instead of hands, metallic or burnt wood-like skins, or radiant crescent horns jutting out from their skulls. Their members—especially Death godlikes due to their insectile appearances—are routinely killed at birth for their (ab)normalities.

The examples included here are only a succinct reading of *PoE2*'s racial and cultural dynamics, but they reveal numerous instances of negative cultural encodings. Even when trying to complicate fantasy tropes, the game cannot help but deploy familiar stereotypes and a reductive universality. This universality reflects an archival logic that has historically been used to enframe the Other. The bestiary mimics the aesthetics of an encyclopaedia via yellowed pages and hand-written typographies, but the archival interface is the projection of a database. Before proceeding, the difference between archives and databases needs to be clarified if we are to understand their roles and functions. Archives and databases are both repositories of curated information. When concerned with the same subject(s), they may hold identical data. Jacques Derrida sees archives as the result of a process of "unification, of identification, of

[28] The game's official guidebooks hint at allegories of historical oppression by referring to some communities as "victimized and marginalized", but these mentions co-exist with a plethora of dubious terms such as "odd skin" (Obsidian Entertainment, *Pillars of Eternity Guidebook: Volume One* 39-45).

classification" (Derrida and Prenowitz 10). Archiving is also a carefully orchestrated "*consignation*" which:

> aims to coordinate a single corpus, in a system or a synchrony in which all the elements articulate the unity of an ideal configuration. In an archive, there should not be any absolute dissociation, any heterogeneity or secret which could separate (secernere), or partition, in an absolute manner (10)

This drive towards (and upholding of) homogeneity is overseen by "archons", authorities who structure, guard, and reproduce knowledge through "archontic power" (10-11). Databases differ from archives by facilitating the ordering processing, and by allowing "large amounts of information to be sorted, catalogued, and queried" by users (Hayles, "Narrative and Database" 1605). Moreover, a database has a "self-describing nature" (1604) because its sorting logic—the meaning behind a row, or the relation between arrays—is signaled by the database itself. But who is the database's user, if not the computer? Players cannot catalogue by adding or modifying information; sorting has already been performed; and querying is at best sporadically authorized by technical cognizers. As Alice Henton states, "digital games are inherently archival," and their design emerges from "a central collection of formative texts and artifacts to guide every stage of its creation" (84). Games are archival when it comes to gathering information, certainly, but archives morph into databases once they are imbued with machine-searchable categories. This localized nexus of information, set in motion by game developers, serves to create the game as data as much as it shapes the play space. Technical cognizers, in projecting their facts about the game world, manifest *techno*-archontic power. Databases become entangled with, and are indistinguishable from, an assemblage which makes its selective knowledge playable. Techno-archontic power sustains itself during play: a repository of information that is not only self-descriptive but self-reifying. This results in an uncanny, near-perfect parity between epistemic claims and imaginary ontologies. Frankensteinian processes stitch together bits and pieces of data to animate monstrosity, but without the threat of noncompliance. The Other is brought to (virtual) life based on claims made about the Other; and fictional beings, in being materialized, validate their own blueprints—procedural identity as tautology.

I have, so far, focused on 'minor' NPCs. Do archival logic, techno-archontic power, and hegemonic re-inscriptions apply to uniquely named NPCs as well, given that their identity is mainly expressed through prose and narrative events? Does their textuality hint at "the diachronic details of lived life" rather than "the synchronic homogeneity of code" (Galloway 103)? To an extent, textual representations do lead to richer portrayals and a sense of depth lacking in other characters. This is primarily because these characters' algorithmic underpinnings are concealed, leading to a series of exchanges that invite interpretation rather than manipulation. The user interface morphs into a new apparatus when a conversation begins. As if mimicking a theatre stage or a movie scene, the camera zooms in on the participants, and other menus vanish to center the text box. Distanced from calculations, a character's utterances, rather than their machinic values, become—in the Derridean sense—playable. While the aesthetics of prose can always be debated, there is no doubt that *PoE2* taps into a striking number of literary traditions. The language displayed in the text box resembles, on the surface, that of contemporary novels. For instance, dialogues are bracketed by speech tags ("he says"). Elements that are not represented through graphics or sounds are included as lengthy textual descriptions: the pungent smell of an alley, the deafening clatters of a crowded inn, or a character's facial expressions. In the case of a game like *Planescape: Torment* (1999), the game script was even compiled and published as a novel. *PoE2's* story arcs also call upon familiar tales and genres. Xoti, an NPC companion, travels across the archipelago to gather the souls of the dead using her god's lantern. Like the Greek figure of Hermes, Xoti's role is that of a psychopomp—but there is no Charon to ferry the souls, nor is there a functioning Underworld. In *PoE2*, the cycle of rebirth has ground to a halt, and Xoti's duty entails safeguarding the dead's essences until the cycle resumes. As the priestess' lantern fills up with distressed spirits, she begins suffering from nightmarish visions. The character, as if narrating a horror story, speaks—in the text box—of being haunted by "shambling corpses" and "a body of stitched together parts and flayed flesh [with] three heads and four stretched limbs."

Regardless of their textuality, NPCs do not exist removed from the game's database, but in a state of deferral. The prose tied to these characters may be stored in rows and columns, but its meaning—unreadable for the machine—is projected rather than calculated. Databases are not all-encompassing: they require "explicit articulations

of attributes and data values" (Hayles, "Narrative and Database" 1605). As Hayles emphasizes, databases and narratives are not antagonistic but "symbionts", and language can complement databases by "gestur[ing] toward the unknown hovering beyond the brink of what can be classified and enumerated" (1605). To be clear, language may bypass, undermine, or contradict data—but can also correlate computational encodings. The example of Alan Greenspan, a renowned economist, presenting data to the U.S. Congress shows that narratives can streamline and validate what has been deemed empirical (1607). The matter, then, is one of narratorial "slant" (Chatman 187) and how languages and stories are used in relation to numerical values.[29]

Returning to *PoE2,* prose, visuals, and other non-machine-readable formations cannot release the Other from selective, data-driven organization precisely because these formations end up narrativizing data. In my discussion of *Baldur's Gate*, the process of character creation showed how morality situates players before their avatar enters the world. Here, I wish to emphasize that character creation is a response to stories told about the game world and its inhabitants—stories tethered to values buried in databases. Among the plethora of options available in *PoE2*, players are asked to choose a background culture. Background cultures include the Deadfire Archipelago (in other words, the hero grew up among indigenous peoples) and Old Vailia (which would make the hero familiar with the trading company, or the Principi Sen Patrena). Each culture grants its members numerical bonuses: +1 to dexterity for Deadfire natives, and +1 to intellect for the Vailian. These bonuses homogenize entire groups while invoking a vivid colonial image: the agile and dexterous native in conflict with the educated colonizer (Buchan 143–44). More pressing is the matter of being able to role-play an indigenous identity. What do players know, during their first playthrough, about the Deadfire, its cultures, and its communities? Nothing beyond what is shown: bonuses, penalties, and brief tooltips with background details. One always journeys into the Deadfire guided by archival knowledge. Then, a simulacrum of indigeneity provides a

[29] Years after testifying, Alan Greenspan conceded that he and other economists worked with datasets too complex to include in their economic model. Greenspan's presentation—although accessible to a layperson and portrayed as factual—relied on partial data and algorithms its narrator did not understand. In Greenspan's own words, he once asked coworkers, "'Does anyone know what is going on?' And the answer was, 'Only in part'" (Tett).

boon which allows the hero to take advantage of communal kinship while remaining unaware of the Other's lived experiences.

Having reached the shores of Neketaka, the hero can make their way through the winding streets of the indigenous capital and reach Kahanga Palace, where the Huana royalty dwell. The PC can then perform tasks for Queen Onekaza II and Prince Aruihi as they devise ways to repel their enemies. Both the Queen and the Prince are densely characterized through text and voice acting, but these NPCs' pliability is re-invoked whenever a skill check turns a conversational choice into another score to beat.[30] The Queen and Prince respond to high perception or intellect the way all other NPCs do: if an attribute is high enough, it is acknowledged as superior and opens up a valuable dialogue path. There is no individual understanding or affinity for diverse forms of intellect—monarchs and merchants all bow before the sovereignty of numbers. Archival knowledge plays a part in these exchanges: some words in the text box—related to fictional dialects or past events—behave as hyperlinks. Clicking on a word brings up a tool tip which defines the word in question or contextualizes its meaning. By speaking with the Queen, it quickly becomes clear that the Deadfire tribes exist as an array of self-governing groups, many of whom are oppressed by the monarchy's caste system. Despite these conversations, completing quests for the Queen and Prince increases the PC's reputation with *all* Huana.[31] Every step towards a pro-Huana denouement unfolds in a series of ambivalences hinted at textually then brought back to binary oppositions eerily reminiscent of machinic states. The symbolic complexities of the Deadfire's politics are repeatedly re-ordered into four core configurations, each associated with the game's main factions. To align with one group entails the conversion of their heterogenous Otherness into valuable arrangements, while reinforcing the other factions' invalid Otherness. As one bonds with the Huana, unique NPCs aligned with other factions gradually slide into new roles—that of hostile entities. The game frames them as it always does: quest lines and dialogue options shrink and, when pushed far

[30] *PoE2* often conceals skill checks, but they are nonetheless common. Over 500 passive skill checks happen during conversations, and around 250 are visible (thus requiring player input).
[31] The game attempts to minimize this issue by including a quest where the Queen tries to forge an alliance with a smaller tribe called the Wahaki. Despite this quest, the Wahaki's decision to join (or not) has little impact on the plot.

enough, disappear. Blue circles turn red, from friendly to aggressive, and leave behind bundles of numerical values wrapped in vaguely humanoid forms.

Siding with the Huana is not an anti- or de-colonial endeavor because *PoE2* is a fantasy narrative of conquest and appropriation. The main quest revolves around a confrontation with a god who is only reachable by siding with, or using, one of the Deadfire's factions. Groups are as instrumentalized as individuals, and helping the Huana (or, as mentioned, enforcing the monarchy's will) is a step on the hero's journey—a possibility which is as acceptable as the Deadfire's brutal colonization. The hero 'fixes' the Deadfire in whatever way they deem best since they are the only entity capable of doing so. The logic at play shares disquieting similarities with Rudyard Kipling's *The White Man's Burden*, and with the orientalist mindset exposed by Edward Said in *Orientalism*. Colonial nations devise an "already pronounced evaluative judgment" which is followed by a "program of action" (207) executed by colonizers—just as technical cognizers beguile players into enacting change. Each NPC met along the way is, potentially or concretely, "a member of a subject race, [who] had to be subjected" (207).

Although this discussion focuses on *PoE2*, my findings are not unique to the game. As mentioned in my background, instances of procedural rhetoric in video games are truths—such as water being harmful to a character who cannot swim. Beyond pointing out discrepancies between code and semiotic layers, there is no counter-argument one can mount to fend off procedural factuality. Discursive responses would require "re-dressing" or "rewriting" (Flanagan 33) by intervening at the site of storage through game modifications and hacks. Responses are also possible outside the local assemblage of play—through conversations, forums, chat rooms, walkthroughs, and as part of a "broader media ecology" (Bogost, *Persuasive Games* 37). Yet staring at an NPC's list of attributes offers no way out—what is available, in that moment, is the choice to keep playing or not. Just like games are more than their rules, representation is more than the inclusion of marginalized identities or cultures in media. When understood as mere visibility, twisted by corporate interests, and implemented to fulfill the subject position's experience, representation is both subjugation *and* interpellation.

I would like to conclude this chapter by asking whether any narrative CRPG could have told a radically different story? For example, could there be a story where the Deadfire's inhabitants are not assigned values; where a player's (regulated) agency does not entail oppression; where countless subsystems of knowledge are not deployed to shape and reify the system's logic; where identities are not selectively mapped and erased; and where alterity is not a deviously justified reason for the Other's subjugation. Looking at the genre's history and most popular entries, the answer would appear to be a firm *no*. *Baldur's Gate*, *Icewind Dale* (2003)*, The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011)*, Divinity: Original Sin* (2014) all embody the genre in unique yet comparable ways. But the issue does not necessarily lie with the genre itself, its form, or its medium, since this would imply properties that are essential and immutable. Rather, the problem lies with how ludic fantasy is envisioned and repeated, as well as the assumptions knit into its fabric.

Pulling at those threads, and undoing them, may offer a way forward.

It seems to me that our critical task might entail tracing the problematic of the articulation between what cannot be said and what should be said, an articulation without guaranteed purity.

—Athena Athanasiou, *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political*

Chapter Three
Uncoding the Other

The complex interplays between storytelling, representations, rules, mechanics, and gameplay continue to be a contentious topic among scholars. As indicated in my background section, consensus is rare when it comes to genre definitions, the critical strategies needed to study digital artifacts, or what video games—as a medium—are. The matter of what games can be, or should be, is even more divisive. Scholars like Ian Bogost argue that video games, regardless of genre, should abandon both narratives and characters in favor of "taking the tidy, ordinary world apart and putting it back together again in surprising, ghastly new ways" ("Video Games Are Better Without Stories"). Games, for Bogost, are at their most impactful when they forgo the individual and wrestle with larger assemblages such as the dynamics of "people, cities, ecosystems, [and] universes" ("Video Games Are Better Without Characters"). Other scholars, mainly associated with computer science and related fields, seek hope in simulation complexity. Rather than do away with characters and multi-linear narratives, these scholars see more advanced simulations as ways to 'improve' NPCs through enhanced reactivity—thus making CRPGs more believable or lifelike (Conroy and Wyeth; Georgeson and Child; Rogers et al.).

Such approaches do not address the issues discussed in this thesis. The assemblages Bogost mentions must still be encoded and authored—which is to say selectively organized by someone. Archival logic, as history has shown and continues to show, is entirely capable of othering groups, cultures, and processes. As the essays in *Videogames and Postcolonialism: Empire Plays Back* (2017) demonstrate, hegemonic biases are laced into the logic and dynamics of large-scale strategy games, including

city management simulators, historical wargames, and civilization-building games. In addition, Bogost's claims that "the best interactive stories are still worse than even middling books and films" and that narratives are "built atop the medium's foundations" seem to be personal opinions presented as facts ("Video Games Are Better Without Stories"). Lacking the space to address the classist and medium-essentialist assumptions fueling Bogost's comments, I would instead ask: stories that are better, worse, or middling according to whom, and for whom?

Finding hope in refined algorithms, scripts, and AI is dubious as well since technology, no matter how advanced, cannot avoid being ideologically charged. In 2008, long before terms such as *machine learning* entered popular culture, Lisa Nakamura's work about racialized and gendered visual cultures on the Internet pushed back against tech-driven "scientism" and claims made about identities:

> [The] high-cultural valuation of science as a way of understanding identity, behavior, and the self as social actor continues to erode humanistically based notions of the subject as socially constructed. This backlash against social constructivism continues apace in myriad spheres of life and not incidentally undermines the notion of race and gender as socially constituted forms that merit and demand active alteration and negotiation for the better. (209)

In subsequent years, countless instances of technological biases and data-driven bigotry proved Nakamura and other like-minded scholars right.[32] Artificial intelligences discriminating against women and people of color (Gufran), and social media platforms splitting identities into marketable data points sold to the highest bidders (Szulc) are only two examples among many. Recent critical works such as *Algorithms of Oppression* (2018), *Invisible Women: Data Bias in a World Designed for Men* (2019), and *Race After Technology* (2019) dismantle the belief that technology is empirically neutral. The depths to which virtual worlds are simulated do not erase questions about a simulation's function, its construction, and its intended audience. Of course, digital spaces may one day evolve into reactive, emergence-driven "instantiations of the

[32] As Nakamura mentions, "Donna Haraway, Anne Fausto-Sterling, and Maria Fernandez" (209) engaged in similar (and, at times, seemingly prophetic) considerations of technology, embodiment, and materiality. To Nakamura's list, I would add N. Katherine Hayles, Sherry Turkle, and Karen Barad.

world's active agency" where humans and technical cognizers no longer communicate within "structures of dominations" (Hayles, *My Mother Was a Computer* 242-243). Indeed, working towards such a future is sorely needed. With the release of *Baldur's Gate 3* set for late 2020*,* the need to attend to the present, and a refusal to leave it *unpatched*, feels all the more pressing. Advertisements and pre-release material show that racial attributes, moral alignments, and combat will all be part of the game's narrative. In addition, one of the game's highly touted features is the opportunity to romance myriad NPCs by "building emotional connections" with these characters (Hart). Considering the work presented thus far, such features should instill doubt rather than delight.

The question, then, is where to go from here. The first chapter of this thesis illustrated how machinic interpellation occurs, and how players are hailed into specific ways of playing. Play follows pre-ordained performances, reproduces underlying ideologies, and conceals the undermining of the player agency. The second chapter showed how the Other is commonly constructed in CRPGs, and how the representation of NPCs—through alterity, knowability, availability, and disposability—enables and justifies their subjugation. Interpellation and subjugation exist in a feedback loop. The two may not be fully excisable, but they can be limited and, in some cases, neutralized. Alternative ways of playing, as I intend to show in this final chapter, are already possible. Resistant practices require re-configuring—rather than abandoning—character progression, numerical attributes, conflicts, and rules. I believe in the urgency of populating databases not solely with hierarchical values, but with symbolic (and, indeed, literary) representations that expand the meanings of game texts. There is a need to build cognitive assemblages that, rather than selectively simulating identities, reflect or allude to the complex dynamics of identity. If possibility spaces and play arise from rules, then developers should ensure that rules do not define play. Questioning the work of Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida believed that:

> Once you grant some privilege to gathering and not to disassociating, then you leave no room for the other, for the radical otherness of the other. I think, from that point of view, separation, dissociation is not an obstacle to society, to community, but the condition (Derrida and Caputo 14)

Gathering is a process of unifying which requires identifying, and thus valuing, in order to bring together—as CRPGs have done.[33] Following Derrida, I suggest an approach based on disassociating and unknowing. This entails the creation of fictional spaces where NPCs are not eminently knowable or characterized by hard-coded truths. This also requires a construction of the fantasy genre that emphasizes differences rather than universal properties shared between identities. To my knowledge, such strategies have been used only once, in an CRPG called *Disco Elysium*.[34]

Upon its release in October 2019, *Disco Elysium* seemed to be another traditional entry in the CRPG genre. Screenshots revealed an isometric view centered on the main character, NPCs, dialogue boxes, statistics, and skill trees. The game's official website described an "open world role playing game" with "24 wildly different skills" and a "revolutionary dialogue system that lets you do almost anything" (ZA/UM Studio). If *Disco Elysium* stood out at all, it was due to its genre and setting: a noir-tinged detective story set in the fantasy city of Revachol. Another hint of the game's uniqueness was buried in the promotional material: "Become a hero or an absolute disaster of a human being" (ZA/UM Studio).

Disco Elysium is the story of Harry Du Bois, a detective who wakes up one morning in a ruined hostel room. Clothes and empty liquor bottles are strewn about, a tie dangles from the ceiling fan, and fresh air comes in through a broken window. Harry, at this point, does not remember his name—in fact, he does not remember anything. As players guide Harry around the room and try to get their bearings on the chaos, colorful, clickable thought bubbles appear next to Harry's head. Unlike the more familiar scenario in which allied NPCs are external to the hero, various parts of Harry's cognition are given voices that appear as dialogue in the text box, and each voice is associated with a skill. In a move reminiscent of morality plays such as *Everyman* or *The Castle of Perseverance*, Harry's emotions, values, and talents are more than characterized—they are characters. As part of the Harry-assemblage, Volition presents

[33] For more on Derrida's deconstruction of Heidegger's work, and the implications regarding justice, the politics of homogeneity, and pluralism, see Derrida and Caputo 151-155. As John D. Caputo indicates, "Heidegger would never have been able to associate himself with National Socialism, indeed with any nationalism whatsoever" had he been more critical of gathering and ordering (152-153).
[34] Another game, *Undertale* (2015), could also be analyzed due to its metatextual elements. However, *Undertale* mainly subverts the rules and forms of Japanese RPGs rather than those of CRPGs.

itself as a reliable companion and uses ethics to convince the detective to stay out of trouble; Empathy allows the hero/disaster to read and respond to emotional cues; Authority urges Harry to assert his dominance and points out instances when he has been disrespected; Encyclopedia chimes in with valuable information about the world or useless trivia; Drama picks up on lies and encourages Harry to lie and perform as well.

The game, within a matter of minutes, reveals how the hero's identity is constructed. The self, rather than a unified entity, is a cacophonous network of clashing narratives who all attempt to tell distinct stories. Since games rely on conflicts, *Disco Elysium* first creates these tensions by fracturing the subject position rather than objects. Each skill is highly intrusive, unexpectedly barging into conversations with NPCs or drawing Harry into a struggle with himself. Putting points into a skill makes it more mechanically effective, but doing so also strengthens its narrative voice. An empathetic Harry may navigate conversations by using his emotional intelligence and by bonding with NPCs, but he is also likely to tear up after hearing a sad story. Throughout the game, skills continuously perform passive checks in the background, as if they were part of Harry's subconscious. To be clear, it is not the player who rolls but *the skills themselves*. Whenever a skill succeeds, its voice bursts into Harry's consciousness and challenges the game's assumed order. Through these utterances, skills quite literally try to play the game—or entice players into playing on their behalf. One of the most noticeable instances of such conflicts over narrative control occurs when Harry tries to determine whether a suspect, a woman named Klassje, is lying. As Harry ponders his next move, a full-blown internal argument erupts across the screen:

> EMPATHY: Something in her demeanor has changed. She's tired, consigned to her fate—to being here with you and what's to come.
>
> VOLITION: Soft, light brown eyes look back at you, directly into the space behind your eye sockets. You see the smoke rise from between her painted red lips. She's beautiful … I have some bad news for you.
>
> YOU: What?
>
> VOLITION: You know these guys?
>
> SUGGESTION: Who, me?

AUTHORITY: Yes, you. He's talking about you, you groveling sycophant.

VOLITION: You too.

AUTHORITY: Me? Get outta here, I'm solid.

VOLITION: These guys are compromised. She's got them singing along to her tune. The little bleeps and bloops you trust for info—you can't trust them anymore.

YOU: Oh my god.

VOLITION: Believe it.

YOU: Which ones exactly are affected?

VOLITION: There's no way of knowing. At the moment I'm afraid it's best to assume … *all* of them.

The argument goes on until Volition concludes that being compromised is not fixable, and what Harry is experiencing is merely human nature. Volition's words, and terms such as "these guys", can also be read as a commentary on the destructive masculinity found in the noir genre and the sexualized roles of female characters. Volition utters the quarrel's final words, the implications of which loom over the rest of the story:

VOLITION: It's better to know you're being played than to be played without knowing it, is it not?

In a moment that feels as metaleptic as it is diegetically fitting, Volition questions the game's (and perhaps the entire genre's) interface and underlying dynamics. Who is telling the story here? In fact, is there such a thing as *the* story, or merely different points of focalization and unreliable narrators? What of the information presented on screen? Are players only capable of deciding the ways in which they are compromised, but not the extent? Although processes repeatedly claim certain truths, a textual depiction of agency—Volition—mounts its own counterclaims by speaking/writing from within yet beyond the database. Language is weaponized to bypass algorithms.

In another radical departure from the CRPG genre, NPCs do not have skills and statistics. Each character has a unique name, appearance, and a place in the world. Code

necessarily dictates how characters respond to Harry, but other than these skeleton scripts, NPCs exist as visual and textual representations. Yet *Disco Elysium* is a role-playing game because Harry has numerical attributes, and active skill checks determine whether the detective can instantiate his intended action. Each conflict, rather than a straightforward numbers' game between two entities, is highly contextual. To clarify, interrogating an NPC involves Harry, another character, and the network in which both characters exist. Is Harry holding a weapon? Is he inebriated? Has he been aggressive, charming, or clumsy throughout the conversation? What are his voices/skills recommending? Has he previously obtained relevant information he can now leverage? What does this person think, or know, about the detective? How does the NPC's personality influence the encounter?

Skill checks thus unfold by mimicking a human situatedness which acknowledges the plurality of forces behind any given moment. Influences and intents, rather than strict values, shape events. Of course, the machine ordering these exchanges cannot decipher their content, but it has no need to do so. In a clever feat of coding and storytelling, abstract connections between utterances are mapped by the authors, and the computer is only tasked with following a series of hand-scripted tags hidden in the code.[35] Here the computer, rather than a participant, is a conversational relay. This role is evocative of the Chinese Room thought experiment, where two people who speak different languages can nonetheless communicate by relying on pre-formulated machinic instructions (Searle). The problem of whether a technical cognizer can wrestle with temporality, inferences, or natural language processing is bypassed. The reasons why a crowbar unsettles a shopkeeper but elicits a defiant smirk from a combat-trained mercenary emerge from the text; an encounter is an assemblage which makes sense based on localized implications. The logic that goes into each difficulty check is human-readable: hovering the mouse cursor over a conversational choice reveals a prospective chance of success, including a list of the elements affecting the percentage displayed. In those moments, *Disco Elysium* does enact a form of computational knowledge which affects future moves, but the interface is a reminder of what has already been read—

[35] Josh Sawyer, *Pillars of Eternity* 2's director and narrative designer, praised the mechanics of *Disco Elysium* and mentioned they were worth "maybe copying in the future." ("Reputation Overload – The Evolution of RPG Reputation Mechanics")

more assisted recollection rather than imposition. Furthermore, the numbers exposed are ambiguous since they are followed by dice rolls—reintroducing the variance found in tabletop RPGs. Beyond the probabilistic nature of percentages, rolling two sixes always succeeds; rolling two ones is an immediate failure. In an added effort to offset deterministic dynamics, skill checks do not exist on a spectrum from 0% to 100%, but from 3% to 97%. In short, numerical certainty is decentered and the world—including Harry—can always elude the odds. As Volition warned, players are compromised and thus not really in control, but it is unlikely that the processes in charge of crunching numbers are in control either.

Returning to the game's opening, and after a bewildered Harry stumbles out of his hostel room, *Disco Elysium*'s main NPC companion awaits in the cafeteria.[36] Sporting a distinctive orange bomber jacket, the character introduces himself as Kim Kitsuragi, a police lieutenant assigned to Harry's case. The case in question is that of a man who has been hanged behind the Whirling-in-Rags hostel. The man's corpse, by the time Kim arrives, has been hanging—and, more gruesomely, decomposing—for a week. Harry, rather than looking into the matter, landed in Revachol and proceeded to drink himself into amnesia. Harry and Kim's main 'quest' is to find out the hanged man's identity and the motives behind his murder, as well as figuring out what happened to Harry. As the two officers explore the district of Martinaise and interview its residents, they become entangled in a web of overlapping stories and potential investigations. These quests include a dispute between a mega-corporation and the local dockworkers' union over a labor strike; rumors of a cursed commercial building where businesses are doomed to bankruptcy; an abandoned church and its poignant, physics-defying acoustics; and a couple of married cryptozoologists searching for a fabled creature called "phasmid"—an entity whose crucial role will be discussed in the final part of this chapter. To be clear, *Disco Elysium* is a fantasy game, even though there are no medieval elements or typical fantasy races. Elysium's countries and continents are separated by a deadly, white fog called The Pale, which has been slowly expanding for millennia. *Disco Elysium*'s characters live in a world threatened by entropy since The Pale is "*the transition state of being into nothingness*". It is difficult to discuss who

[36] Cuno, another NPC, may join Harry's investigation—but only if Kim is killed in the line of duty, and only towards the end of *Disco Elysium*.

these characters are in a limited amount of space because talking about them requires talking to them. I emphasize the term *talking* because *Disco Elysium* does not have a combat system, and Harry is not expected to fight or kill NPCs to progress.

The absence of combat should be understood unambiguously. In this thesis' first two chapters, I spend little time detailing the inner workings of combat systems. Instead, I address the influence of combat in relation to the diegesis, identity construction, performances, and encounters with Otherness. Given my aim, the intricacies of simulated battles (real time, turn-based, grid-based, or the calculations involved) matter far less than how the presence or absence of combat affects reading and responding.[37] In the case of *Disco Elysium,* inanimate objects, people, and animals all share an identical green outline which makes them visible without defining them. The process of meeting the Other is not enacted with the prospect of violence, or the need to prevail. Pressing the tab key, like in other CRPGs, highlights important parts of the game world. Yet there are no statistics, names, or hints of how characters feel towards the pseudo hero. Crucially, when Harry does interact with the world, what he perceives is based on his skills. A graffiti is therefore not a set object, but a phenomenon: what the subject sees is subjective, yet tangible enough to be discussed with others. Harry, when versed in Conceptualization, will describe the graffiti as a beautiful piece of art. Should the Visual Calculus skill take over, Harry will deduce that the artist is left-handed, or that the paint used is still fresh.

While many NPCs play notable roles, Kim Kitsuragi is significant for my argument because of his unique impact on the narrative(s), as well as his metatextual comments. As Chris Breault suggests, this companion "sets up the game's essential mystery, which is not 'who killed the hanged man' but 'what kind of story is this?'" (Breault). As a by-the-rules police lieutenant trying to solve a crime, Kim is another key voice reacting to Harry's actions:

[37] At one point, *Disco Elysium* deconstructs combat with the arrival of heavily-armed mercenaries hellbent on avenging the hanged man—himself a mercenary. The soldiers want retribution, not justice, and they have no qualms about killing Kim and other characters. The player 'fights' by picking options in the text box. This unique scene is worth highlighting because the game, by breaking down violence into distinct parts, forces its audience to acknowledge that fighting is not a trivial matter. What is the player willing to do, or risk, to save Harry, Kim, and others? Since there is no timer, the player may agonize over their next move—and its consequences—for several minutes.

> [Kim] endlessly questions your methods of videogame investigation. From the beginning, he gives you kind of a hard time about how you're playing Disco Elysium: the fact that a locked door exists, he says, doesn't mean that it's important. You don't need to talk to every civilian, collect every random item, or run everywhere, he tells you. (Breault)

However, I disagree with the assessment that Kim's suggestions are bad advice since "Disco Elysium really does work like the other RPGs that conditioned you to act this way" (Breault). Kim Kitsuragi, although a fictional entity, is correct about the fabric of the world he inhabits: there is no need to talk to every NPC, or explore every corner of Martinaise, to advance through the story. Kim recommends playing by the rules as he knows them because his subjectivity is anchored in the text's logic. In being so close to the fiction, Kim questions the player's extradiegetic knowledge since it results in actions that do not—and cannot—make sense to the lieutenant. Paraphrased, Kim's comments boil down to asking *why do you play the way you do?* Players, after years of formally abiding by certain actions and internalizing an intra-genre literacy, may indeed perform based on automatisms. Since interpellation disciplines by concealing and enticing, Kim's words counteract by revealing and challenging. Yet revealing is not an explanation, but an opening that shines a light on unexplored possibilities—an enacted, playable deconstruction of the CRPG genre. Granted, the game still follows a narrative arc built around Martinaise's hanged man, but this restriction is acknowledged when Volition warns Harry about being compromised. Volition and Kim point towards the same problem from different angles: indeed, performances are delimited, but perhaps not as much as one may first assume.

Another reason why *Disco Elysium* deviates from other CRPGs has to do with the concept of completion, and the inputs needed to reach the text's final paragraph. In another metatextual and intertextual twist, the game fictionalizes other games to comment on the complexities of play, and to distance *completion* from *winning* or *victory*. Three examples stand out: Harry and Kim may meet a dice maker in the doomed commercial area; the two officers can sit around a table and play a board game called Suzerainty; and several locations allude to the story of Fortress Accident SCA, a defunct game studio whose employees tried to design a play-by-radio RPG. Suzerainty, recommended to Harry by a bookseller, is described as "a civilization-building game

where you build a civilization, then set off to brutally colonize and repress other civilizations", and playing the game leads to some noteworthy remarks ("winning is usually the point of playing games"). However, it is the novelty dice maker who best contextualizes the game's overall structure. As other businesses went bankrupt, the dice maker kept on working. Her atelier, hidden away in a corner of the commercial building, is reached by passing through derelict offices. When asked about the curse and rumors of a paranormal force toying with local companies, the dice maker replies:

> "What does that even mean?" The dice maker laughs. "I've been here for 14 years, selling novelty dice to role-playing enthusiasts. Not exactly a million reál business idea, yet somehow I've survived despite the talk of malicious energies. Strange, isn't it?"

This dialogue alludes to the genre of tabletop role-playing games, and perhaps to *Dungeons & Dragons* itself.[38] In the world of Elysium, there is nothing startling about a dice maker defying the odds, given Harry navigates reality and conflicts similarly. In fact, Harry can commission dice from the artist which, once pocketed, improve future skill checks—as if dice were magical artifacts spread across multiple textual topologies. The artist also shares her thoughts about the nature of role-playing, dice, and multi-linearity:

> "It's like every time you cast a die, something disappears. Some alternative ending, or an entirely different world…"
>
> She picks up a pair of dice from the table and examines them under the light.
>
> "That's why people like role-playing games. You can be whoever you want to be. You can try again. Still, there's something inherently violent even about dice rolls."

The dice maker's comments reveal a great deal about *Disco Elysium* while critiquing the genre to which it belongs. Failure is not a reason to stop, but a rewiring of reality—there is no reason to conflate winning, completing, and reading a text. Victory is a cultural construct arising from certain performative and narrative variations; a feeling

[38] The dice maker later clarifies that, in her opinion, the curse is simply capitalism.

elicited (or imposed) by one story among others. As importantly, victory is not needed to tell a complete tale—just like a narrative denouement is not a hard-coded value. Nevertheless, the text acknowledges the existence of a weight, a sense of loss, when possibilities vanish. The "inherently violent" nature of dice rolls matters as well, since dice rolls are attempts to manipulate the world in precise ways. In response, the game normalizes ill-fated rolls and uses them to narrativize failure. Unsuccessful rolls generate unforeseen dialog choices, or result in embarrassing performances. These instances bring to mind Henry James' thoughts on narrative structures, and the power of "pleasurable failure" that emerges from a text's "organic center" rather than from its more polished, syntactic spaces (Puckett 127). Furthermore, active skill checks come in two colors: white and red checks. An overwhelming majority of skill checks are white, which means they can be attempted several times—but not immediately. Trying to punch Measurehead—a two meter tall, tattooed-covered racist with the frame of a bodybuilder on steroids—and getting knocked out is not the end. Failure is an inciting incident which spawns new stories: Kim scolding Harry for dragging them into situations where Kim "may have to shoot random civilians"; subsequent chats with Measurehead leading nowhere because the NPC remembers humiliating the detective; or Harry's skills reminding him that such displays of bravado are not meant for dangerously out-of-shape alcoholics. Still, Harry can try again—but will the player want him to?

Granted, some rolls can suddenly end the game: drinking a homemade Molotov Cocktail, consuming too many drugs, or pushing Harry to dwell on his past when his morale is critically low. These game-ending moments are stories in themselves and, in lieu of a generic game over screen, *Disco Elysium* prints out pertinent newspaper reports. Thus, recklessly pursuing an armed NPC despite Kim's warnings leads to a report that reads:

> An officer of the [Revachol Citizens Militia] hot on the track of a suspect died yesterday of causes yet to be determined.
>
> "I told him not to go after the suspect without me," said Lieutenant Kim Kitsuragi, the deceased's partner on the case. "But it seems that he wanted to play the hero."

> "It's just like him to run straight into the lion's den, fly unzipped and arms flailing," said Satellite-Officer Jean Vicquemare, friend and colleague of the officer. "If ever I saw a man with a death wish..."

Fifteen different newspaper reports exist, each of which is labeled as an ending. *Disco Elysium* can be the tale of a self-destructive cop succumbing to a heart attack; two officers being gunned down after attempting to forcefully arrest local dockworkers; or the story of a heartbroken detective retiring after a suspect's harrowing suicide.[39] These endings are often unexpected, and it is unlikely players will simply accept them as final. Keeping the dice maker's words in mind, these endings offer glimpses into realities where casting a die has erased Harry. Should Harry avoid such erasures, the murder plot becomes the 'standard' way to complete the game. The detective's arc moves towards a deceptively recognizable climax: cracking the case.

Disco Elysium's final moments warrant a lengthy close reading since they bring together the issues of genres, systems, heroism, subjugation, and Otherness that are central to the game—and central to my thesis as well. Harry and Kim's investigation leads the officers to the Sea Fortress, a military stronghold located on a small island a few hundred meters offshore. The fortress, now abandoned, was built to defend the city of Revachol from a communist revolution which erupted (and was then brutally crushed) half a century prior to the game's events. A senile deserter has been living on the island since the revolution, surviving on rations, rainwater, and whatever he could salvage. Using his sniper rifle, the communard has been assassinating people on the mainland for years. His victims include the hanged man, whose corpse was then used as a prop by dockworkers as part of the union conflict. But the murder was never about the hanged man himself. The deserter, in his own words, wanted to punish "that woman"—meaning Klaasje, a suspect briefly mentioned earlier. The old revolutionary had grown obsessed with her, watched her daily, and shot her lover mid-coitus in a fit of disgust, anger, and lust.

[39] One report reveals the authors' playful inclusion of different literary genres. Should Harry's morale run out, the headline reads "COP GIVES UP THE DETECTIVE GENRE FOR SOCIAL REALISM". The report mentions that Harry, now homeless, occasionally shouts "I never loved that woman" at passersby. This exact phrase is uttered by the character of Hamlin in Vernon Lee's 1884 novel *Miss Brown* (300).

Although such gruesome motives are all too common in real life as well as in crime fiction, the deserter's role shatters the illusion of *Disco Elysium* as a traditional detective story. While the main characters track down the suspect by investigating, only a few clues prove relevant: a single bullet lodged in the hanged man's mouth, enigmatic footprints, and a smattering of bullet holes uncovered around the city. At no point can the criminal's identity be deduced in advance. There is no satisfactory, orderly resolution to the case. Klaasje has no connection to the deserter beyond *his* obsession with *her*. The deserter did not even know his victims' names, and justifies his actions based on a defunct ideology. At best, he witnessed fragments of his victims' lives through his weapon—an apparatus of knowledge, judgment, and sentencing:

> KIM KITSURAGI: "Are you *always looking* through the scope of a rifle?" He explains: "I'm just trying to *understand*."
>
> THE DESERTER: "A rifle's scope has the best magnification."
>
> KIM KITSURAGI: "And if you don't like it…"
>
> YOU: "…you pull the trigger?"
>
> THE DESERTER: "Yes." He looks you in the eye. "Think of it as a form of critique."

The communard's words, on the surface, are those of a true believer, but his beliefs are corrupted by baser instincts and waning cognitive functions. His language is filled with dehumanizing terms and, in particular, a plethora of misogynistic slurs. The world as he sees it is a mass of "druggies, prostitutes and rentiers" and the district of Martinaise is a garbage heap where people live "in tents, like animals". As for the upper classes, the deserter believes that the "bourgeois are not human".[40] In lieu of a perpetrator with clear-cut motives, the killer has a memory "riddled with holes", repeatedly contradicts himself, brings up nonsensical rationalizations, and shows no trace of remorse. By the time Harry and Kim face him, the killer has one bullet left, which he has saved for

[40] Removed from context, it may seem that *Disco Elysium* is critical of communism and revolutionary ideals. However, the game's politics are much more slippery, and the text shows an overt disdain for ultraliberalism, fascism, and capitalism. For an analysis of *Disco Elysium*'s politics, see Kunzelman.

himself. As the conversation draws to a close, the culprit confesses—then immediately forgets his confession.

In a game full of NPCs who occupy unusual roles, the deserter's place in the world is worth considering: he is not a villain to be fought, and he is not part of the narrative before the detectives reach the island's shores. It is by adopting the deserter's perspective that his role becomes clear. He is the game's twisted depiction of a hero figure who, when seen externally rather than *played as*, reveals the questionable dynamics of heroism. From the deserter's point of view, the world has gone wrong. The dice did not roll in his favor, but the binaries remain: good and evil exist, and evil won. Within this essential structure, every entity has a place. The communard cannot be different from what he is, and his quest cannot end because "there is no *after* the war". He refuses to relinquish his weapon since he "can only lay it down before an enemy commander of corresponding rank"—a nonexistent figure who would fit the role of the antagonist. The deserter's rifle has the "best magnification" because its lens justifies his actions—not unlike a user interface. Through this narrow scope, everyone but him is guilty by default. The killer's gaze exposes the biases of heroic subjectivities: a hero's vision is righteous and all-seeing because it is an assemblage of "easy relativisms and holisms built out of summing and subsuming parts" (Haraway 585). As importantly, the deserter believes that he transcends the bonds of society and Others, which is why he has "been in solitary confinement [his] whole life". Moreover, when asked about his part in the war, the communard replies: "I am an *ideological officer*—I belong to the Party, not the Army".[41] The killer has existed, and continues to exist, as an idealized construct who abides by absolutes. From deterministic subjectivity to a logic that demands deaths in the name of a greater cause, the deserter embodies the computational hero figure discussed in my first chapter.

This revelation dislodges Harry, whose heroic function was uncertain from the beginning. Like the deserter, Harry Du Bois is a dubious legendary figure. With over a hundred cases solved, he is one of the best cops Martinaise has ever seen. But Harry's quest for justice had a cost: his journey led him to hurt and push away the people in his

[41] Much earlier in the game, and in a hallucinatory moment, Harry can ask the hanged man's corpse who killed him. The victim's ghostly voice simply replies, "Communism."

life—treating them, in short, like disposable NPCs. Around Martinaise, disgruntled characters call Harry, with noticeable traces of animosity or resentment, a "hero cop". By using Kim's radio, Harry can inform the precinct that he has lost his badge and gun; the news is met with an eruption of laughter and derisive comments from Harry's colleagues. Police officers and NPCs around the city caustically refer to Harry as "Dick Mullen", a fictional, larger-than-life hard-boiled detective in the vein of Philip Marlowe. At countless turns, it is as if the secondary and tertiary characters of fantasy are given the space to speak their mind about the heroes who upend their lives. Another crucial event from Harry's past is when his fiancée, Dora Ingerlund, left him. She too was a victim of Harry's actions, and she chose to walk away. The detective's behavior towards others worsened in the years following her departure. Six years after losing Dora, Harry's suicidal drinking binge marked the conclusion of his hero's journey—one that left him isolated and unable to change. Amnesia, however, saves Harry by casting out the person he once performed as. The narrative of *Disco Elysium* begins the morning after heroism has been deleted.

Dora Ingerlund is an important figure because she is to Harry what the revolution is to the deserter. Still in the throes of amnesia, Harry repeatedly mistakes Dora for Dolores Rei, a saint-like political figure from centuries past. Referred to as "Her Innocence Dolores Rei" or "The Innocence of Humanism", Dolores is a specter lingering in the memories of Martinaise's citizens as both person and ideal.[42] This is true of the revolution as well: the deserter infantilizes and femininizes the uprising by calling it the "Girl Child Revolution" for whom he is "always waiting". What separates present-day Harry from the deserter is their subjectivity, and how they categorize themselves—as well as others. Amnesia may be a crime fiction trope, but it is also a reboot of Harry's subject position. In being de-mythologized, he may yet change. *Disco Elysium* is a game of growth like other CRPGs, but growth towards one's chosen ways of being in the world rather than towards power.[43] Allocating skill points and validating

[42] Dora and Harry's story is revealed in a dream sequence which occurs prior to meeting the deserter. In the dream, Dora appears as Dolores and urges Harry to stop obsessing over her—a troubling foreshadowing of the deserter's obsession with Klaasje.

[43] An undiscussed mechanic called the Thought Cabinet should be mentioned since it works against power and growth. The cabinet is a list of personality traits Harry unlocks by internalizing thoughts. These thoughts characterize Harry—making him, for example, a "Sorry Cop" who keeps apologizing—but they also impose *negative* numerical attributes.

dialogue choices guides Harry *away* from heroism. Dolores and Dora, Harry and the deserter, innocence and violence, holy murals and war-torn edifices, abandoned corporate offices and a dice-maker's atelier, all echo each other as they flow through circuits of meaning-making and become distorted by myriad subjectivities. None of the characters are who they are meant to be and they play, against their own will, ill-fitting roles.

As the conversation with the deserter draws to a close, the game embraces fantasy in a final attempt to show that the world does not have to be systematized on anyone's terms—and that, maybe, it is best played that way. The phasmid, the mythical grasshopper-like entity that the cryptozoologists have been searching for, emerges from the island's reeds. The creature looms over the detectives and waits. The deserter, sitting nearby, is unable to see the phasmid. Since his worldview depends on absolutes, there is no room for ambiguous ontologies—like a database unable to parse language. The conversation between Harry and the phasmid, although too extensive to transcribe here, works as a telepathic exchange between two entities speaking for and about themselves, with no power struggle or conflict:

> INSULINDIAN PHASMID: I exist.
>
> YOU: I exist too.
>
> INSULINDIAN PHASMID: Tell me what it's like for you.
>
> YOU: Fire, burning.
>
> INSULINDIAN PHASMID: Fire? Where?
>
> YOU: On the horizon. Pale fire. This thing we're both sensing is coming to an end.
>
> INSULINDIAN PHASMID: That is your problem. Nothing ever ends for me.

The game points toward its own conclusion for a specific reason.[44] In other CRPGs, the Sea Fortress would be considered the "point of no return" (Berger 59). That is, a

[44] "Pale fire" may be a reference to Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, a metatextual poem with hypertextual elements, and which can be read non-linearly. For further reading on *Pale Fire* and its textual networks, see Rowberry.

destination players visit as a prelude to the ending. This video game trope creates a dramatic stage detached from the larger world map where a final confrontation takes place. The phasmid, for whom endings do not exist, expands the text instead. The creature speaks of the world's unwritten history and the far reaches of Elysium, hinting at how little of this fictional reality has been mapped by humans. In doing so, the text (re)presents through absence and implications. An unexplorable world, although detached from hard data, is materialized as readers parse the words describing it. The phasmid's relation to the unknown is not a source of frustration. Instead, the universe is an awe-inspiring assemblage of Otherness, which the creature describes as "swarm of sounds" and vibrations that "speak of complexities totally beyond [the phasmid's] understanding". On the other hand, Harry's subjectivity, sense-making, and memories—and, in all likelihood, human sentience—are portrayed in frightening terms:

> Few of us can begin to imagine the horror of you—with all creation reflected in your forebrain. It must be like the highest of hells, a kaleidoscope of fire and writhing glass. Eternal damnation. Even when you're sleeping…
>
> And when you wake, you carry it around on your neck. With eyes open that cannot help but swallow more behind the mirror. I feel great, mute empathy for you.

The fire mentioned in these lines echoes the flames sensed by Harry, a portent of the end. Before the creature leaves by simply wandering off-screen, and before Harry and Kim report to their precinct, the phasmid makes a peculiar request from the detective. The creature asks Harry to forget "that woman" and to "turn from the ruin. Turn and go forward". The woman's identity, and the phasmid's words about her, are always a reflection. The code shifts in response to past choices, but the text creates gaps—the woman could be Dora, Dolores, Klaasje, the revolution, the city of Revachol, or anyone else. A kaleidoscope, then, suggesting ideals and essentials are best abandoned. But it is another plea from *Disco Elysium*'s only non-human NPC that grabs the reader's attention: "What if you blink?" the phasmid asks. "Are we still here? (Please don't blink). What if you misplace us all one day—or just forget?"

*This isn't a *game* and you're not the *hero*. You don't *get* infinite chances to do the right thing.*

That's not how the world works.

–Kim Kitsuragi, *Disco Elysium*

Conclusion

I began this thesis by asking readers to play, if only for a moment, the role of the hero. A pre-determined encounter with Gruk, a goblin, set the stage for my discussion of processes of interpellation and subjugation in fantasy CRPGs. By illustrating the dynamics of the computational hero's journey, I show that players are continuously hailed and controlled by different texts. As players traverse smooth and striated topologies of play, they are interpellated into embracing a game's underlying ideologies, into believing they have greater agency than they do, and into enacting performances that subjugate entities in the game world. NPCs are Othered through various texts, and often portrayed through hegemonic re-inscriptions, essentialism, de-individualization, and instrumentalization.

Interpellation and subjugation share a synergetic bond. The protagonist needs to subjugate the Other to become a hero, and interpellation is required to represent this oppression as heroic, beneficial, morally acceptable, or diegetically sound. Othering flows, like hero-making flows, exist across textual topologies *and* among the interplays between numerical values, prose, processes, rule sets, databases, game mechanics, or other parts of the assemblage. Biases, assumptions, and stereotypes circulate among human and non-human actors. Fantasy CRPGs make claims and, by twisting the player's subjectivity, concretize those claims—none of which would be possible without first reducing entities into computable, usable markers. Yet CRPGs and fantasy, as shown by *Disco Elysium*, are modular formations. The oppressive dynamics common to those genres are not defining traits: they are conventions rather than necessities. As conventions, these dynamics can be resisted, subverted, minimized—and potentially erased. CRPGs do not have to rely on heroic narratives, monsters whether generic or unique, or in-game entities primarily defined through hard-coded values. CRPGs are

less oppressive (ideologically and ludically) and more *playable* when they create open-ended spaces for *play*. This statement, I hope, will one day read as trite rather than as a call for action.

For reasons of scope (to say nothing of focus and clarity), I have not delved into many aspects of the *Baldur's* Gate series, *PoE2*, and *Disco Elysium*, but these games are all ripe for lengthier criticism. In closing, I wish to highlight undiscussed aspects of *Disco Elysium* which, in order to be addressed, would have required adding another chapter to my discussion. Depending on player choices, Harry can internalize overt forms of bigotry. One may thus role-play an openly misogynistic, homophobic, white supremacist detective. Unlike *PoE2*, which equalize attributes across factions, *Disco Elysium* works against its own depictions of hateful beliefs. Kim Kitsuragi will call out Harry for making xenophobic remarks; racists are portrayed as idiotic or as holding irrational views; and women often fight back against Harry's repulsive comments. There is also an interesting tension between ideologies represented textually and simulated procedurally. Adopting an ultra-capitalist worldview lowers the Empathy skill. Internalizing a thought named Advanced Race Theory results in losing points in Drama and Conceptualization since Harry is "fooled by the absurdity" and the theory is "mostly aesthetic". Genre issues are pertinent as well: the game's fantasy-noir frame is supported by familiar gender roles, such as the male detective as protagonist and several *femmes fatales* as secondary characters. The game comments on these roles metatextually, but archetypes are nonetheless re-inscribed. Given sufficient space, the inclusion of a fourth chapter would have allowed me to discuss several forms of ludic subversion, or play-as-critique, in the diegesis and beyond. How does play amplify, or undermine, critique? How do metatextual, parodic, or satirical mechanics affect interactive diegeses? What of hacking, cheating, and extra-diegetic ways to alter—or bypass—game texts?

My thesis opens up possibilities for future research in terms of interactive texts, games, genres, and the development of new analytical strategies. My findings apply to many fantasy CRPGs beyond *Baldur's Gate*, *PoE2*, and *Disco Elysium* and I have tried, as much as possible, to refer to other relevant games by title. Since different CRPGs have unique game worlds, rule sets, mechanics, or may exist on different hardware platforms, more research is needed to determine how disparate elements explicitly

contribute to processes of interpellation and subjugation. The question of genre also invites further research. Beyond originating in Europe, the U.S., or the U.K., the games mentioned all share common features: hundreds of thousands of words of prose displayed in a text box, as well as quest-driven, branching, heroic storylines culminating with an ending. Other than this description, there is no clear term to point to these cultural texts. Their labels combine the CRPG acronym with other gameplay aspects, such as *open world, first-person,* or *turn-based*. Furthermore, my findings apply to the *Fallout* and *Mass Effect* series, both of which are science-fiction games with heroic protagonists. The issue is complicated further by a split between CRPGs and Japanese role-playing games since the latter entail, at times, different visions of heroism and role-play.

This thesis has urgent implications beyond CRPGs and video games. Many of us living in the Global North spend our days interacting with cognitive assemblages. We effortlessly become entangled with smart phones, tablets, desktop computers, televisions, personal assistants, cloud-connected appliances from fridges to lightbulbs, and security cameras—to only name a few technical cognizers. Hayles' discussion of military drones as cognitive assemblages alludes to umbral swarms of *other* assemblages to which people in the Global South are subjected (*Unthought* 131–41). Not that drones—or financial algorithms, or governmental databases—care for geographical boundaries and jurisdictions. Luddists who advocate for a reduced reliance on technology ignore a crucial factor: cognitive assemblages proliferate irrespective of consent—and some even thrive from ignoring it. Salutary oppositions do exist: the Open Source movement, for example, fights to make software and hardware artifacts readable, modifiable, and accessible to everyone. In July 2020, the creators of *Dungeons & Dragons*, in response to the Black Lives Matter movement, announced that future game editions would largely do away with pre-determined racial attributes (Wizards of the Coast). At times, it is difficult to find hope in such counter-tendencies. Hope falters when a new, supposedly apolitical, *Call Of Duty* game is announced, and millions of players look forward to slaughtering non-white NPCs; when smartphone and bodycam footage of police officers murdering an unarmed person do not put a stop to murders or lead to justice; when apps such as Zoom (or WhatsApp, or Gmail) become popular modes of communication while harvesting and monetizing personal data; or when

women—among many other identities and groups—are (cyber-)stalked and preyed upon for simply expressing themselves on social media platforms.

In 2014, Ursula K. Le Guin received a Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters. Upon accepting this lifetime achievement, Le Guin delivered an acerbic, defiant speech that ridiculed the literary world's condescension towards genre fiction, and she admonished rapacious publishers as well as authors who let "commodity profiteers sell [writers] like deodorant". Le Guin reminded her audience that "Resistance and change often begin in art. Very often in our art, the art of words" (The Guardian). I would like to conclude my thesis by relating my findings to the art of words and the discipline of literary studies. I suspect that a growing number of scholars share similar (and, for now, atypical) backgrounds when it comes to reading and writing. For some of us, textual narratives first came in the form of comic books, websites, and—if finances allowed—games. My own experiences include reading Harlan Ellison's *I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream* years after playing the 1995 adventure game, and discovering *Hamlet* as a website with scenes connected through hyperlinks. Required school reading, as befits the French educational system, meant engaging with the work of Victor Hugo, George Sand, and Charles Baudelaire. Elusive notions such as genre, labels, literary fiction, or pulp, influenced but did not pre-define reading: texts and stories simply came in different forms. A fifty-page game manual or the back of a collectible trading card could be as moving as a canonized poem written by a long-dead man; there was no way to know without reading these texts.

I share these anecdotes to re-emphasize the need for scholars to approach texts of all kinds as assemblages. Forms, genres, and media are interfaces and informational arrangements—*parts* of assemblages—rather than intrinsic indicators of quality. Technological flows are non-deterministic, but they nonetheless disrupt the act of writing (encoding) and reading (decoding). The ways in which materiality affects our relation to written words requires consideration. This exchange, for example, did not only involve two parties separated by text. 'My' thesis is co-authored by a text editor, reference manager, PDF editor, operating system, keyboard, thesaurus, search engine results, and other cognizers. 'Your' reading is co-constructed by printed pages, or perhaps a laptop, tablet, e-reader, or phone screen; each element renders text uniquely, from paragraphs and margins to displayed pixels, ink quality, and font legibility.

Algorithmic intrusions, such as the highlights and underlines imposed by word processors, are expected—but not anodyne. Hijacking writing and reading is trivial when users are hailed by Microsoft Office, Google Docs, or Adobe Creative Cloud. Gradually, one no longer wonders how or why technical cognizers order and gather texts from creation to interpretation. Scholars are interpellated by 'their' interfaces, just like video game players: on-screen ink and on-screen blood can be systemically erased or accentuated. I do not expect critics and researchers to become full-fledged coders, but I hope that techno-textual-apparatuses, and textual criticism across genre and medium, will not be disregarded by literary scholars. In August 2020, Princeton University's computer science department used machine learning to proclaim that "the meaning of words does not necessarily refer to an intrinsic, essential constant" and that meaning is "shaped by culture, history, and geography" (Nuwer). Scholars from other fields swiftly rallied to social media platforms to point out that these discoveries are nothing new. But what would happen if our disciplines were unable, or unwilling, to partake in these conversations? Is it not happening already? How many written works of fiction, due to their unconventional forms, are slipping past us? Why are they deemed unconventional, if not because of conventions? As Hayles argued in 2004, works of electronic literature do not herald the death of print literature or traditional criticism—they reiterate the importance of literary studies. Digital texts generate many possibilities, including "an opportunity we have not had for the last several hundred years: the chance to see print with new eyes" ("Print Is Flat, Code Is Deep" 87).

One expected ending here could loop back to heroes and goblins, and urge readers to play as non-heroes from now on. But since a *tabula rasa* is impossible, I prefer to keep performing the role of Kim Kitsuragi, as I have from the very first line of this thesis. I claim that there are other ways to play in response to the data-driven (un)real, and that it is time to devise new, fantastic strategies rather than let presumed rules go unchallenged. That is my move; I look forward to yours.

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Appendix

Attributes: numerical values associated with traits such as Strength, Dexterity, or Wisdom. A character with 18 Strength is stronger than a character with 5 Strength.

Companion: a secondary character allied with the hero and who plays a prominent role in the narrative. Although companions are technically NPCs, some CRPGs allow players to control companions during combat, choose the equipment they wear, or allocate skill/attribute points when a companion levels up.

CRPG: a computer role-playing game.

Dice rolls: rolling a set of dice to determine the outcome of a conflict or skill check.

Experience (or Experience Points): a value meant to reflect a character's personal development (physical, mental, etc.) as they travel the world and overcome challenges. When a character gains a certain amount of experience, they may level up.

Grinding (or Farming): to repeatedly kill enemies in a specific location in order to gain experience, money, or items.

Level: a number which suggests a character's total strength or power. The term may also mean *game level*—a section of the game world with unique challenges or tasks.

Level up: to gain a level, and thus have access to new attributes and skills.

Mechanics: mechanics are methods, procedures, or dynamics that transpire during play and based on the rules. Rules are lists of imposed norms; mechanics are framed performances (or instantiations) resulting from these norms. See *skill check* for an example.

NPC: a non-playable character. Akin to the secondary characters in a work of literature.

Player Character (or PC): the playable character, a game's hero or protagonist

Quest: a task assigned to the hero, which leads to rewards such as experience, items, or which advances the game's plot.

RPG: a role-playing game. Refers to the genre rather than a specific medium.

Skill check: a mechanic used to determine how well (or badly) a character performs an intended action. Skill checks may call upon a character's attributes, skills, and equipment. These checks may also require rolling dice, drawing cards, or using other game tokens.

User Interface (or UI): visual elements that enable human-machine interactions. These elements include menus, tooltips, text boxes, health bars, characters sheets, and many others. The term *interface*, for some scholars, overlaps with medium, and describes the broad form and means of engagement with an artifact.