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Seminar Paper

Tragedy in Video Games
A Case Study of Bioshock Infinite, Inside and Red Dead Redemption 2

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This paper aims to analyse the role of tragic avatars and their relation with the player through creating meaningful deaths in video games through three case studies. The three selected games are from different genres but all present the tragic destiny of a player character in an oppressive world. The first one is *Bioshock Infinite* (Irrational Games 2013), set in 1912 in a US American dystopian uchronia led by a dictatorial prophet. The second is *Inside* (Playdead 2016), a puzzle platformer set in a dystopia with a mind control mechanic. The last one is *Red Dead Redemption 2* (Rockstar 2017) set in a turn-of-the-century United States mimicry assisting massive urbanisation, militarisation and industrialisation. All three games make the player embody a protagonist who dies fighting against the oppressive system they are living in.

I) Tragedy in Digital Media

> A work of art is tragic if it substantiates the following situation: *A protagonist who commands our earnest goodwill is impelled in a given world by a purpose, or undertakes some action, of a certain seriousness and magnitude; and by that very purpose or action, subject to the same given world, necessarily and inevitably meets with great spiritual or physical suffering*. (Mandel 1961, 20; original emphasis)

Video games as electronic media have two narrative properties that, at first glance, seem incompatible with tragedy. The first one is its peculiar form of closure, "electronic closure" (Murray 2017) due to its non-linear structure, and its possibility to offer multi-version narratives. The second is the shift of agency from the protagonist to the player character whose choice has to be constrained by the game's system and narrative.

1) Player's relationship to closure

a) Electronic closure

According to Barbara Herrnstein-Smith (1987, 30), closure depends on conventions found in "certain formal and thematic elements" (ibid.). We can find the video game's closure conventions using a hypertext analysis focus.

How do we make the necessity and inevitability of the fate of the protagonist in a media that embeds a non-linear narrative and that has a non-traditional relationship to closure? This question has been treated by Janett Murray (2017) at a time when tragedy in digital media had to be invented. The main incompatibility between tragedy and electronic media was the absence of closure of the latter. As she argues, hypertexts do not find the closure that traditional linear texts have because of the possibility the former offers "to erase memory, to start over, to replay an event and try for a different resolution" (216). Furthermore, this appeal to electronic media "is in part an enactment of [a] denial of death" (ibid.). To counteract this absence of closure, she establishes what she calls "electronic closure" (ibid.) which happens when "the map of the story inside the head of the reader has become clear" (ibid.). In other words, the reader of a hypertext experiences closure when she understands its global structure.

Other authors worked on closure in digital media and its effect on our reader/player experience. Espen Aarseth (1997) defines closure in hypertext in a similar manner as Murray, namely as the passage from *hypertext aporia* to *hypertext epiphany* (Aarseth 1997, 90-91). *Hypertext aporia* is created by the author by giving only partial information necessary to the full understanding of the text, with the goal of making the reader frustrated but also motivated to discover more. When the reader has enough elements to understand the global structure of the text, she experiences the *hypertext epiphany* which is similar to the *electronic closure*. The displacement of closure pre-exists the hypertext (Douglas 1994, 163) with a novel like *The Good Soldier* (Ford [1915] 2012). Closure is the end of any information the narrative can reveal and the possibility for the reader to make sense of the text as a whole (Douglas 1994, 164). In this case, our reader's expectation becomes what Brooks (1985) calls "anticipation of retrospection" (23), in other words, it is the capacity of the reader to assume that she will be able to reflect on what she read after finishing a text. Even though "The End" is not explicitly written, "our experience of the text is not only guided but enabled by our sense of the "ending" awaiting us" (Douglas 1994, 184).

To sum up, our sense of closure in digital media lies in two of its aspects: the understanding of the structure of a text (*hypertext epiphany*), and the shift of readers' expectation to only fully understand a text when having fully explored what it can give, physically (*anticipation of retrospection*).

b) Non-linearity:

The following section will analyse how tragedy can be implemented in digital non-linear narratives.

In *Inside*, the player spatially and temporally follows the story by going from left to right and exploring the entirety of the game's map. At the end of her playthrough, the player character dies on the beach at the far right of the map. However, by loading save states, the player can come back to the different places of the game and collect different items that will allow her to unlock another ending where her avatar disconnects the mind control system and thus kills itself. Tragic. This clearly exemplifies the shift of closure operated in digital media and how it conjugates itself with a tragic scenario. The player is thrown into the game world without context, *in medias res*: there are no introductory cutscenes, no dialogues and virtually, nor written or spoken words during the entire gameplay. She is encouraged to make sense of this world by exploring, at first linearly, the different locations and mechanics. The game's iconic mechanic is a mind control power that allows the player character to take control of zombie-like creatures that can recursively take control of another creature. By the end of the game, the player understands, through the exploration of the scientific facility, that this mind control mechanic is the core of the oppressive system of the game world. However, the first linear ending does not put an end to this system but only to the player character's life. This ending is unsatisfactory because the protagonist, despite the seriousness of the world and his death, does not have a greater purpose than going from left to right. Nevertheless, this ending allows the player to make sense of the game world and enables her to give a tragic purpose to her avatar: destroying the dystopian mind control system at the cost of his life.

To understand its complex hypertext configuration, I will use Ryan's terminology (2001). During her first playthrough, the player experiences *Inside* as a vector with side branches (250). The main vector is the game's map, from left to right, and the side branches are the hidden collectables. However, she is confronted with a "fatal aporia" (252), proper to the maze structure

(251), when getting to the first ending. This aporia, in the sense of Aarseth (1997), motivates the player to find the missing elements of the story. During her second playthrough, the game's structure changes into a "network with a subset of nodes that are linked to every other one" (247n1) working similarly to a table of contents which "enables the user to return to the table in one trip from every point in the system" (ibid.). In our case, this table of contents appears in the pause menu with the different locations that the player can load to find the missed branches of her first playthrough.

The global understanding that is traditionally only happening with a cognitive interaction between the reader and the text, is enabled in *Inside* with an unlocked enacted narrative and interaction proper to the video game as a hypertext.

c) Multiversion:

In *Bioshock Infinite*, although the story is linear, the game makes the player aware of the parallel versions that coexist, in the manner of Borges's *The Garden of Forking Paths* (1941). At the beginning of the game, the player is meant to retrieve a girl, Elisabeth, and has to go to the flying city of Columbia, which is literally and figuratively separated from Earth, without further explanation. During her playthrough, the player can discover the oppressive structure of Columbia that takes its inspiration from the most brutal events and ideologies of US American history. The player can only make full sense of her mission at the very end of the story, with a major plot twist: the antagonist leader of Columbia and the player character, Booker, are the same person but from two different parallel universes and the only way to stop Columbia is for Booker to get killed. In this last scene, all the different versions of Booker end up at the same place, and all Elisabeths kill the player character.

The inevitability of the main character's death is this time multiplied by all the versions of the character that exist. It is not one set of choices that leads Booker to his demise but all the sets of choices. This is what Murray offered with her kaleidoscopic story in which "[e]ach separate viewing would provide its own experience of catharsis, but no single one would feel complete." (Murray 2017, 220).

> Tragedy is always ironic, but it is not because an action *eventually* leads to the opposite of its intention, but because that opposite is grafted into the action from the very

> beginning. [...] The concrete applications of this idea –the plots which express it– are inexhaustible. (Mandel 1961, 24; original emphasis)

2. Moral Choice

In the next section, we will analyse how the moral choices of the player are integrated into tragedy. One of the crucial aspects of tragedy is that the protagonist is set by their choice. Video games have to shift this agency to the player.

In *Red Dead Redemption 2*, the story is tragic only if the player chooses to make the protagonist, Arthur Morgan, a character with high moral values. The game has an honour system that can be either negative or positive with six levels of high honour nuance, influencing Arthur's personality.

Arthur Morgan is the armed arm of an outlaw gang led by Dutch Van der Lyn who continuously lowers his moral values to keep his gang's activities alive in a country that has a growing power and hostility toward outlaws of his kind. In the second half of the game, Arthur is diagnosed with tuberculosis and is certain to die soon, leading him to reflect more on his life and morality. From this point, Arthur's honour is uncapped and the player's choice will have more impact on the scenario.

During her playthrough, the player can choose – and is encouraged – to perform different actions that will increase her honour level. These actions can be minor in effort and impact, for instance, greeting NPCs, or major events, for instance, saving or helping characters during the main plot. Having a high honour level turns Arthur into a heroic character, changing the game's dialogues and making available a mission, "Do not Seek Absolution", where he can try to make up for his past mistakes by helping out the family whose sick father was killed by him and infected him with tuberculosis.

The crucial choice that the player can make occurs toward the end of the game when Arthur can either choose to save his friend John, leading to Arthur's heroic satisfying death, or retrieve the money, leading him to be honorlessly killed by the traitor of the gang under the eyes of Dutch. The point here is that in order to make full sense of Arthur's death and have a satisfactory ending, the player needs to make – what the game considers to be – the 'good' choices that will transform the story of an outlaw into the tragedy of a heroic idealist outlaw outpowered by an industrialised and militarised America. This conception of tragedy is related to another definition

of the tragic hero: the Vegetation God (Mandel 1961, 15) who births, decays, dies and rebirths. After the death of Arthur, the player can now take control of John, the tragic protagonist of *Red Dead Redemption* (Rockstar, 2010) and now the successor of our tragic hero.

> In tragedy, we die with the hero and then we are resurrected with him. For a while, like the celebrant of ancient mysteries, we become god himself. (Mandel 1961, 16)

These three cases are good examples of how video games can use their nonlinearity, multi-version narratives and moral choices to adapt the tragedy genre to their medium by making the protagonist's death meaningful.

3. Catharsis and Complicity

> Tragedy is a representation of a serious, complete action which has magnitude, in embellished speech, with each of its elements [used] separately in the [various] parts [of the play]; [represented] by people acting and not by narration; accomplishing by means of pity and terror the catharsis of such emotions. (Aristotle 2010, 92)

One crucial element of the tragedy is the relationship built between the protagonist and the spectator with the peculiar catharsis[1] effect at the end of the play. All three games present a character who commits a "great error" (Aristotle 2010, 98) that leads "from good fortune to misfortune" (ibid.). In contrast to traditional drama, the player is not only a spectator but can also be made accomplice of the protagonist.

The sense of complicity is defined as the "unpleasant feeling of responsibility" (Juul 2013, 112) and is achieved in different manners in the three games. The one closer to traditional drama exists in *Red Dead Redemption 2.* Here, the player is forced to commit the *great error* by beating a poor Polish farmer suffering from tuberculosis to retrieve a few dollars from him. This mission is necessary for the game's progression and is the point where Arthur gets infected by tuberculosis. It is only after the tuberculosis diagnosis that Arthur can make up for his past mistakes and have a cathartic experience. In *Bioshock Infinite*, the player only learns about the *great error* of the protagonist toward the end of the game. This time, "players suddenly realize

[1] "A much debated Greek term, related to a verb meaning 'to cleanse' or 'purify'; usually left untranslated and understood as 'purgation,' it can also mean 'clarification.'" (Aristotle 2010, 92n4)

that they have been working toward an abhorrent goal"(Juul 2013, 109) at the end of their playthrough. However, players do not have to stand the feeling of guilt for long because the avatar is killed (and thus cleansed) very shortly after the revelations. In *Inside*, the avatar is deprived of any background and the player can only make sense of her actions with the events of her playthrough.

II) Player-avatar relationship

Another way to make death meaningful is to have a goal-oriented approach to the player character. In this second part, I will focus on how *Inside, Red Dead Redemption 2,* and *Bioshock Infinite* manage to change the protagonist's goal for the player to have a satisfying ending despite the death of their avatar.

The video game-specific relationship between the protagonist and the avatar protagonist impacts the meaning of the tragic death. In games, when a player inhabits a character, the player "acts in the game as if the goals of your surrogate are your goals" (Gee 2008, 258). In the aforementioned games, **the protagonists' end goal is not to die but not to survive either**.

Video games can integrate death in multiple ways in their narrative. As Sabine Harrer (2013) establishes, death can be a temporary state of failure as it is in *Super Mario Bros* (Nintendo 1986). In these cases, deaths are errors in the narrative that the player has to replay correctly to get the true and full story. Some games explicitly tell their player about it, for instance in *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* (Ubisoft Montreal 2003) the Prince says "No no no, that's not what happened." when the player dies, or in *Assassin's Creed* (Ubisoft Montreal 2007) the Animus device makes sense for the player to replay a mission if they failed. Such a phenomenon trivialises death and loss (Harrer 2013, 609-10) and undermines a possible representation of the human condition in video games. Instead, death here is giving a chance for the player to make up for their mistakes, and some scholars see it as one of the functions of games: "This is what games do: they promise us that we can repair a personal **inadequacy** — an inadequacy that they produce in us in the first place" (Juul 2013, 7).

This need to repair an inadequacy is questionable. Should we refuse our inadequacies at all costs? In Carse's *Finite and Infinite Game* (1986), the question of inadequacy or illness in a game is treated differently.

1. Red Dead Redemption 2 and Illness

> Illness always has the smell of death about it: Either it may lead to death, or it leads to the death of a person as competitor. The dread of illness is the dread of losing. (Carse 1986, 76)

However, illness can be healed not by restoring the lost functions (what Carse calls "curing" (75)) of oneself but by recentering oneself in a "way that [one's] freedom as a person is not compromised by [one's] loss of functions" (77). In this sense, our inadequate protagonists do not need a cure, but to adapt to their situations by playing with the rules they are given.

Because the tuberculosis diagnosis makes the player and the protagonist aware of their imminent death, this metaphor of illness is taken both literally and figuratively in *Red Dead Redemption 2*. On one hand, Arthur's tuberculosis makes him reconsider his role and meaning within a very short life. On the other hand, Arthur can be considered ill not only because he has tuberculosis but also because he is part of a world that is going extinct. His skills as an outlaw soldier are less and less efficient as the army and police become stronger. This sense of inadequacy also occurs when arriving in St Denis, the fictional industrial city of the game, where the player character is disempowered and can not move and escape as freely on his horse as in the wild plains. In the last chapter, Arthur tells one of his associates that he is becoming tired of fighting and asks her to make sure that his friends will get a new life: "I mean…help them escape when I… You know you and me… we're more ghosts than people… but them… they, they could…". On the contrary, the gang leader Dutch does not understand that he will never be able to continue his obsolete outlaw career.

> "Finite players play within boundaries; infinite players play with boundaries" (Carse 1986, 10)

To use Carse's finite and infinite games concept again, Dutch and Arthur represent finite and infinite players respectively. Dutch's only goal is to win his finite game where he plays the outlaw with anarchist values regardless of the world around him and denies the increasing absurdity of his plans. On the other hand, Arthur questions and changes his goals according to the circumstances to save as many lives as possible. In other words, he changes the rules of the game to "prevent anyone from winning the game and to bring as many persons as possible into the play" (Carse 1986, 9). One dialogue showcases the dichotomy between the two characters. After closely escaping death from many plans, Dutch tells Arthur during the last mission of Chapter 5: "the game ain't over, Arthur. I mean I ain't [...] played my final move" to which Arthur answers: "I guess I'm more interested in saving lives than… winning at chess."

On the player side, *Read Dead Redemption 2* can be interpreted as a variant of what Juul (2013) calls a "suicide game", a game where "1. The protagonist undergoes many painful experiences. 2. The player is aware that the goal of the game is to commit suicide. 3. The player exerts effort in order to commit suicide" (Juul 2013, 96). The player does not make the character commit suicide but knows that, by finishing the game, Arthur will die. However, the relationship between the mood of the player and the mood of the protagonist in this tragedy as described by Juul (see 2013, 91) is more complex than a simple 'successful player and unsuccessful protagonist' situation. Arthur does not understand death as a failure, as in the traditional video game meaning, but as a necessary and inevitable event. Similarly to the player, the player character is aware of the tragedy happening and is still able to make sense of it.

In *Red Dead Redemption 2*, the deadly illness of the protagonist actualises a new meaning to his life and the player's actions.

2. Inside and Interactional Metalepsis

Inside has a different approach to the player-avatar relationship as it uses an interactional metalepsis device (see Bell 2016; Ensslinen 2011; Ryan 2004) in the form of a mise en abîme as argued by Barnabé and Delbouille (2018). This device blurs the line between the different layers of reality, in this case bringing the player from the real world downward to *Inside*'s fictional world. In contrast to *Read Dead Redemption 2*, this has the effect of creating a distance, defined

by Henriot (1989) as the space needed for the player to be conscious that she is playing, between the player and her avatar owing to her awareness of being playing.

> Rhetorical metalepsis opens a small window that allows a quick glance across levels, but the window closes after a few sentences, and **the operation ends up reasserting the existence of boundaries** (Ryan 2004, 441; my emphasis)

The phenomenon concretely happens during the mind control phases of the game, when the avatar can enter a device making it control a zombie-like creature that can in turn enter another device to control a third creature. This creates an interactive mise en abîme allowing the player to recursively think of herself as part of the mind control system as she is also using a controller to control an unnamed avatar. Echoing Murray's analysis of dystopian literature where "the computer screen or virtual reality helmet is as addictive and delusional as the feely or televisor" (2017, 24), the player and her avatar find the goal to shut down and exit the system, knowing the consequence: the death of the avatar.

In *Inside*, the player can understand that death is not her avatar's main concern or that her avatar is already dead. During a scene when the avatar tries to escape from an underwater monster, if the player gets caught before a certain point, it will result in a traditional failure type of death. However, past this point, the player will get caught by the monster, at first thinking she failed, but the character revives with the help of that same monster and can continue the adventure. The avatar dies a second time at the right border of the world during the first playthrough, and the final time when it disconnects the mind control system.

In *Bioshock Infinite*, although the interesting part of the plot arrives all at once in the last scene, we learn that the character's goal is to kill the alternate version of himself**.**

> They [, Video games,] situate meaning in a multimodal space through embodied experiences to solve problems and reflect on the intricacies of the design of imagined worlds and the design of both real and imagined social relationships and identities in the modern world. (Gee 2007, 48)

Videogames present systems to the player. The sense of destiny has to come from a system. Therefore the oppressive system setting arguably appears as the connector between the game as a system and the game as a story. The Narrative Architecture (Jenkins 2004) of a tragedy should be an oppressive one. Where the player's agency is forced into making the choices that lead to her demise.

III) Oppressive Settings

All three games take place in oppressive settings, led by violent authoritarian entities. The tragic avatars and their connection with the player in these settings allow her to reflect on her player position and to what extent playing a game is an oppressive experience.

Oppression is defined as "the exploitative exercise of power by individuals and groups over others" and "the structuring of marginalization and inequality into everyday routines and rules, through the continuing acquisition and maintenance of economic, political and cultural capital by dominant social groups over long periods of time, reflecting the existence of major social differences" (Clifford and Burke 2008, 16).

The avatar can be controlled only with the directional arrows, a button to jump and a button to grab, however, the character will act for itself in some parts, forcing the player into experiencing the world as an oppressed one.

In *Inside*, the player gets to understand her relationship with the game's world in the first minutes: the one of a fugitive. The game mechanically realises this forced experience by changing the result of the player's input. One of the first interactions the player has with the environment is to hide from the soldier in the background. While the player only presses the right arrow, the avatar turns stealthy by itself. The player cannot fight or engage in conversation with the enemies of the game but only run away. A few moments later, the sneaking turns into an escape run from a dog, making the player backtracking impossible. The first message of the game is to take care of all dangers and to be ready to move fast. Later in the game, the player has to cross the quality check of the zombie creatures. In this scene, the avatar imitates the movements of the brainwashed creatures to prevent itself from being spotted and eliminated by

the machines. Finally, the last part of the first ending is a long runaway from the scientific facility ending with the death of the avatar.
In *Bioshock Infinite*, the avatar is also forced into the oppressive world of Columbia from the beginning. It starts with the avatar being attached to his seat during his travel to Columbia. Then, at the entrance of Columbia, when the player character Booker says “I only want to get through", he is immediately stopped by the priest he is talking to and gets his head submerged under water for a baptism-like ceremony. During his quest, he experiences multiple roles like the wanted “black sheep” or the revolution leader without having any agency over it.
In *Red Dead Redemption 2*, Arthur Morgan experiences different positions of oppression at moments he can not fight back but only flee. He is at first under the order of the gang leader Dutch but has to flee the Pinkertons and the army. In the epilogue, his successor, John, is then under the control of a rich landowner and then of the bank.

These elements of the game force the player into the position of the avatars as oppressed individuals and make her think about “**how they envisage their position**, worth, entitlement to resources, **and validity** in the world” (Gunraj and Ruiz 2011, 256; my emphasis).

The three games are theoretically close in the way they make the players experience oppression, an opposing force that they can not fight back, but they differ in the way they give the player agency to navigate through the oppressive world. The main approach here will be subversion of the world’s oppression tools. I use here subversion in the sense of hijacking the tools of domination by an agent that otherwise is in the inferior part of the power relation.

Even though *Bioshock Infinite* sticks to traditional FPS mechanics, its characteristic gameplay elements are subversions of some of Columbia’s weapons. The first one, common to the Bioshock series, is the use of Vigors, drugs that allow the player to cast magic spells. The second, is the Sky-Hook, a tool that can be both used as a melee weapon and to ride the Sky-Lines, rails that allow transport across Columbia. However, it is mainly focused on confrontation and massive destruction of the city which makes it the less interesting example in this regard.

Inside is straightforward with its subversion as we use the mind control system to progress in the game with the final goal of destroying it.

Red Dead Redemption 2 takes a different approach to subversion. Arthur acknowledges his incapacity to take another role than a fighter, however, he uses his abilities for other goals than making money. The role of Dutch and his gang as outlaws is already a subversion of the ideal of freedom proper to the United States into anarchist ideals. It is because of the control exerted by the authorities that freedom as a political tool can no longer be used by outlaws.

The three studied games, although they are from different genres, share essential elements that make possible the adaptation of the tragedy genre into video games. The three of them integrate agency and nonlinearity so that the sense of closure and inevitability of the protagonist's choices leading to their deaths stays intact. Video games also present new devices connecting the protagonist to the player spectator either by reflecting on the role of the player narratively or mechanically. If designers want to create such tragic digital spaces, it makes sense that an oppressive setting allows the deployment of all the devices studied in the two first parts. In other words, the oppressive settings of the three games are not the result of chance but the logical consequences of the tragic video game design. One could arguably say that video games, because of the possibilities offered by the experience of interactivity in a system, are a richer medium of tragedy.

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