



Université de Montréal

**Between Play and Design :  
The Emergence of Hybrid-Identity in Single-Player Videogames**

par

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Thèse présentée à la Faculté des arts et des sciences  
en vue de l'obtention du grade de Philosophiæ Doctor (Ph. D.)  
en d'études cinématographiques

avril, 2012

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Université de Montréal  
Faculté des études supérieures et postdoctorales

Cette thèse intitulée :

Between Play and Design : The Emergence of Hybrid-Identity in Single-Player  
Videogames

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## Résumé

Cette thèse examine la nature complexe de l'identité dans les jeux vidéo solo. Elle introduit la notion d'identité-hybride, et propose un cadre analytique pour déconstruire la jouabilité à travers les genres afin de distinguer des moments d'émergence d'identité.

Alors que la recherche sur l'identité se concentre couramment sur le joueur ou le personnage-joueur (ou les deux), la notion d'identité-hybride est une forme d'identité fluide, parfois éphémère, qui existe *entre* le joueur et le personnage-joueur. L'identité-hybride se développe au cours du processus de jeu et inclut nécessairement le joueur (expérience, contexte de jeu, etc. ), l'environnement du jeu (le design, les mécaniques, etc.), et la médiation technologique (ordinateur, console, etc.) qui facilite la jouabilité.

Afin de cerner les différents aspects du gameplay qui contribuent à l'émergence de différents types d'identité, un cadre multiforme a été conçu pour isoler les interactions spécifiques? qui comprennent les interactions *joueur/personnage-joueur*, *personnage-joueur/personnage non-joueur*, *joueur/environnement du jeu*, *personnage-joueur /environnement de jeux*, et *joueur/joueur*. Il a été associé à un cadre secondaire qui comprend l'examen des spécificités du joueur individuel et la médiation technologique qui facilitent le jouabilité. Une analyse systématique d'expériences de jeu et des éléments de design de trois jeux différents; *Mirror's Edge* (DICE, 2008), *Alone in the Dark* (Eden Games, 2008), et *Fable 2* (Lionhead Studios, 2008), a été réalisée pour illustrer les différents degrés d'apparition d'identité dans différentes structures de jeu.

En comparant les trois analyses, l'utilité de ce cadre pour mettre de l'avant les éléments qui contribuent au (ou peuvent entraver) le développement de l'identité et, plus spécifiquement, l'apparition de l'identité-hybride, est démontrée. Ces trois exemples jettent les bases d'une discussion plus profonde sur la définition, le contexte, et le processus d'identité-hybride dans les jeux vidéo en général.

**Mots-clés :** jeux vidéo solo, identité, jouer, design, structure, les méthodes de recherche.

## Abstract

This dissertation examines the complex nature of identity in single-player videogames. It introduces the concept of hybrid-identity and proposes an analytical framework to deconstruct gameplay across genres to distinguish moments of identity emergence.

While identity research commonly focuses on the player or the player-character (or both), the concept of hybrid-identity is a fluid, at times fleeting form of identity that exists *between* the player and the player-character. Hybrid-identity develops during the networked process of videogame play and necessarily includes the player (experience, play-context, etc.), the game environment (design, mechanics, etc.), and the mediating technology (computer, console, etc.) that facilitates gameplay.

In order to delineate the different aspects of gameplay that contribute to the emergence of different types of identity, a multifaceted framework was devised to isolate specific interactions between the *player/player-character*, *player-character/non-playing character*, *player/game environment*, *player-character/game environment*, and *player/player*. This framework was coupled with a secondary frame which includes examining the specificities of the individual player and the mediating technologies that facilitate gameplay. A systematic analysis of gameplay and design elements of three different games; *Mirror's Edge* (DICE, 2008), *Alone in the Dark* (Eden Games, 2008), and *Fable 2* (Lionhead Studios, 2008) was performed to illustrate the varying degrees of identity emergence in different game structures.

The utility of the framework is demonstrated by comparing the three gameplay analyses and highlighting the elements that contribute to (and possibly hinder) identity development and more specifically, the emergence of hybrid-identity. These three examples form the foundation for a more in-depth discussion on the definition, context, and process of hybrid-identity in videogame play.

**Keywords :** Single-player videogames, identity, play, design, structure, research methods.

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*This dissertation is dedicated to Velixious,  
Manx, and the world of Norrath where it all  
began.*

## Acknowledgments

My most sincere gratitude to my advisor, Bernard Perron for his support, rigor, and patience. Thank you for believing in me and my work, and for helping me through all the challenges that I have faced throughout my PhD. It has been a privilege to work with someone so passionate and dedicated.

Thank you to Bart Simon, who introduced me to game studies so many years ago, and for being that voice in my head always asking ‘why do we care’? Thank you to Richard Bégin, Fern Delamere, and T.L. Taylor for graciously agreeing to be on my committee. I am grateful to Mia Consalvo for her support and help in looking to the future. To Sal Humphreys, Rosa Mikeal Martey, and Torill Mortensen for their words of encouragement. To the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council for funding my research.

My deepest appreciation to Shanly Dixon, Tamara Peyton, and Cindy Poremba for their support, help, and friendships for without them I would not have been able to get this far. To my colleagues and friends; Dominic Arsenault, Alison Harvey, and Carl Therrien who have privileged me with many discussions, advice, and support. To my friends Elly Abramovitch and Stephanie Savoie who have been there when I needed them the most. To the Doctoral Ladies Writing Group for helping me think through my early ideas.

Thank you to my parents, who taught me that no matter what life throws at you, never give up. To my sister, who has always believed in me, no matter what. To my partner in life Alen, who has been there by my side through thick and thin and has helped me achieve my dreams so far. Finally, to my daughters Nerrissa and Kiana; thank you for being the best daughters a mom could ask for, and remember, there are no limits.

# Introduction

Videogames have the potential to challenge the notion of human-centric identity. Through networked gameplay, the player engages with a fictional world through an intangible character visible on a screen and manipulated through a wired controller<sup>1</sup>. There is an interconnected network of material, technical, and perceptual elements that all contribute to the process of videogame play; a process that may be initiated by the player, but that is not wholly determined by them. The actions on the screen and in the game are not exclusively the player's, yet they are not completely the character's either. They are a combination of networked interactions that are initiated by and respond to a wide range of intermediating elements. Influenced by Hayles' work on cybernetic theory (1999), cybernetic media through Giddings & Kennedy (2008), and the notion of assemblage as defined by Taylor (2009), this dissertation asserts that identity in the process of videogame play is not limited to the *player/player-character* (or avatar) interactions. It includes (but is not limited to) player interactions with and within the gameworld as well as with the technology that mediates the play.

Literature on identity and videogame play often focuses on the player or the player-character as the locus of identity (Bessière, Fleming Seay, & Kiesler, 2007; Blinka, 2008; Chee & Smith, 2006; Martey & Consalvo, 2010; Nakumara, 1995; Rehak, 2003). However, I argue that between the played experience and the game's design lies the potential for an identity to emerge that does not belong solely to the player, nor to the playable character.

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<sup>1</sup> I use the word 'wired' here figuratively to infer the connection between the controller and the game.

However, controllers may be wireless, or not even exist at all as seen in the case of games that use the human body as controller with motion sensors, etc.



While both the player and the playable character contribute to what I will term ‘hybrid-identity’, it is also equally influenced by the other elements within the network including (but not limited to) the game design and the technology that mediates the gameplay.

The notion of hybrid-identity was born out of both auto-ethnographic and ethnographic research conducted over the course of five years and four massively multiplayer online games (herein MMOG) titles: *EverQuest* (Sony/Verant, 1999), *Dark Age of Camelot* (Mythic Entertainment, 2001), *Lineage II* (NCSoft, 2004), and *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard, 2004), and resulted in my master’s thesis (Boudreau, 2007). While the term hybrid-identity was not actively used throughout my earlier research, the conceptual foundation was laid to consider an identity that existed between the player and their in-game avatar.

MMOG’s are open-ended gameworlds set within a thematic narrative that is meant to create context for the player’s gameplay. They offer the player the opportunity to create a player-character – often referred to in MMOG play as an avatar – before entering the gameworld. While still confined to the prescribed design elements of the particular game the character is being created for in regards to context specific player-options, gameplay does not occur until the player initially creates the avatar. As such, the avatar begins as something wholly created by the player, uninfluenced by gameplay at the outset. However, over time, through the social gameplay of MMOG’s, the avatar develops beyond the original characteristics chosen by the player.

Entering the game of *EverQuest* for the first time, I had opted for an avatar that bore some resemblance to my physical self, and embodied characteristics that I possessed or

admired. Having always had an affinity for Nordic culture, I chose a female Barbarian, selected physical characteristics that has some resemblance of my own (namely hair and eye colour), named her Velixious (below, figure 1), and logged into the game.



*Figure 1: Velixious in Temple of Veeshan armor with Epic Spear of Fate*

The early stages of gameplay were quite straightforward and open ended: kill various types of enemies, accumulate points and skills, and level up. Although *EverQuest* is a massively multiplayer game, it was possible to play alone in the lower levels, alongside all the other players. In these early levels (below level 20), friends were casual and often fleeting. But Velixious remained my only avatar and a character defined by the vague game lore of the Barbarian race coupled with my choices and actions within the game.

As time wore on, enemies increased in difficulty, forcing group play. Friendships developed and guilds were formed to tackle the larger quests and adventures the game offered. It was through this stage of gameplay that I realized that Velixious was no longer a simple character developed between myself as a player and the game's options. The social

dynamic inherent in MMOG's had added another dimension to Velixious that I couldn't quite describe at the time. As months turned into years, I realized that the avatar that I had innocently created to resemble my physical self in a virtual fantasy game had taken on an existence of her own.

Through the networked process of play, there developed an identity beyond the designed characteristics embedded in her design, beyond my choices as a player, and beyond the played character she had become. The more time I spent playing *EverQuest*, the more I felt a sense of that there was more than just myself, the player, and Velixious, the Barbarian Shaman. There was an identity outside of these things that was developed through elements of gameplay outside of the control of player choice and game design. Her identity also developed through other player's stories. She was part of a community.

I wanted to understand what this identity was and where it came from. I wanted to understand how the relationship that I had with my avatar – one that was created through my actions and her scripted re-actions – had become bigger than the both of us. Over time, she was no longer simply a product of my gameplay and she was not merely a predefined character in a videogame. There was a sort of hybrid-identity that emerged between myself as a player, and Velixious as an avatar in a gameworld. What began as a desire to understand the relationship between myself and Velixious in the game of *EverQuest*, has expanded into a socio-technological inquiry into the identity that emerges from the interactions between pre-designed avatars, the players that play them, and the technology that mediates the gameplay.

Through online networked gameplay coupled with the inherent social component of multi-user online games that includes player commitment and community, hybrid-identity has the potential to not only emerge between the player and the avatar, but can also become a separately identifiable form of being over time. One example of hybrid-identity that can exist independently of the player and the avatar can be seen in spaces outside of the gameworld such as guild websites and message boards or forums.

In an effort to understand what hybrid-identity was and how it was developed an analytical framework was devised to articulate the different gameplay interactions that were prominent in MMOG play. This framework focused on four distinct, interactive relationships between: the player and the in-game playable character (often referred to as the avatar), the player and the game environment, the avatar and other avatars within the gameworld (both player-characters and non-playing characters), and finally the interactions between players and other players in the game connected through the internet. Through further consideration of gameplay after my Master's research, a fifth type of interaction, those between the avatar and the game environment directly, was added to the framework.

The goal of this dissertation is to determine whether or not hybrid-identity has the potential to surface in single-player videogames, which lack the social, player-to-player interactions. By utilizing the framework as a systematic tool in an analytic auto-ethnographic context, this dissertation will perform a deep analysis of three different single-player videogames; DICE's *Mirror's Edge* (2008), Lionhead's *Fable II* (2008), and Eden Games' *Alone in the Dark* (2008). The framework will be employed to deconstruct the processes of gameplay specific to each title. The analysis will also look to understand the

different processes of identity construction and development that occur during single-player videogame play.

While initial analysis will be performed through the lens of the five relationships within the framework, it will be expanded on to include the mediating technology and in-game mechanics in order to develop a broader understanding of the networked elements that contribute to the process of identity construction, whether of the player, the playable character, or any other type of identity that may emerge, including hybrid-identity.

A secondary goal of this dissertation is to test the efficiency of the existing framework that was created through MMOG research as a analytical tool within the context of single-player videogames. Understanding that the elements within the networked process of play inevitably change depending on a wide range of factors including, but not limited to game title and genre, different mediating technology (console, computer, etc.), the skill level of the player, and the external physical context within which the game is played. As such, these things need to be considered in the gameplay analysis as well.

However, while there are some contributing elements to the network that can be determined before gameplay begins (such as the mediating technology), it is not possible to determine which elements exist during the process of play beforehand, or how these elements will operate within the process of active gameplay. Therefore, the initial framework is utilized as a basic analytic lens to be built upon as different elements appear through the networked process of play. Consequently, this dissertation also aims to develop a set of methodological tools that will facilitate gameplay analysis in order to highlight

these processes and elements that contribute to gameplay and ultimately, the potential emergence of different types of identities.

In moving beyond a completely player-centric approach to understanding gameplay through looking at the entire networked process of play, it is my hypothesis that identity becomes decentralized, making room for the possibility of hybrid-identity to emerge in different play contexts. Even though the concept of hybrid-identity emerged from the desire to understand the relationship between the player and the player-character/avatar, it does not originate solely from this relationship. The goal of this dissertation is not to privilege the player as the origin of identity. Hybrid-identity is not about the state of the player or the avatar, rather, it is about a non-human-centric identity that develops through the networked process of videogame play which is a separate, often abstract, identity.

The use of the framework as an analytical tool serves two distinct purposes. Firstly, to deconstruct gameplay through focusing on the different types of interaction that occur during gameplay and to reveal any necessary subcategories that will be added to the framework as needed. These categories will then be applied to the analysis to determine their impact on the emergence of different types of identities. Secondly, by highlighting game-specific examples, the framework will serve to homogenize the specificities of different games, facilitating a broader comparative analysis across titles and genres.

### *Chapter Summaries*

This dissertation is comprised of six chapters that will work towards building a deeper understanding of the gameplay processes that facilitate different types of identity. It

will also demonstrate how the analytical framework can assist in determining whether or not hybrid-identity has the potential to develop during contextualized gameplay. Finally, it will work to develop a methodological toolkit for future gameplay analysis.

Videogames are socio-technical artefacts that exist within a broad context of meaning spanning several disciplines. As such, Chapter one, “Concepts and Theories”, will focus on the literature that has informed this research. Instead of presenting a traditional exhaustive review of the literature, this chapter aims to assign specific meaning to the terms and concepts used throughout this dissertation. Concepts include (but are not limited to) identity from both a sociological (Goffman, 1959; Parsons, 1965; Merton 1957) and social-psychological (Biesta, 1994; Burke, 2003; Cerulo, 1997) perspective. Identification from both sociology (Mead, 1934) and film studies (Cohen, 2001; Freidberg, 1990; Metz, 1975), as well as representation and meaning through cultural theory (Ebert, 1986; Hall, 1997; Lacey, 1998). This chapter will also briefly address two theories of networked interaction; cybernetics (Hayles, 1999), and Actor Network Theory (Latour, 1987; 2005).

Chapter two, “Videogame Identities & Framework” will focus on theories of identity as they pertain specifically to videogames including work on projective identity (Gee, 2003), discovered identity (Tronstad, 2008), and hybrid-identity (Boudreau, 2007). The core of this chapter will detail each element within the analytical original framework that was developed through MMOG play. It will also outline new elements that have been added to the framework including the category of mediating technology. As such, the process of gameplay will be rearticulated in light of this new addition. This chapter will

also discuss the research methods employed through this dissertation. Finally, this chapter will contextualize the games selected for in-depth analysis.

Chapters three, four, and five, “*Mirror’s Edge*”, “*Alone in the Dark*”, and “*Fable II*”, are extensive case study chapters. These chapters will demonstrate the use of the framework in methodological action. In doing so, the analysis will highlight any shortcomings of the original model within the context of both single-player videogames in general, and in the specific game title in each chapter (and genre) as well. These case studies are not intended to be critiques of the games, but rather serve to deeply explore the different networked processes of gameplay that facilitate different types of identities. Each chapter is subdivided into sections that structure the individual elements within the framework. By drawing on specific played examples coupled with aspects of the game design that afford certain gameplay actions, the analyses will make it possible to further develop the existing framework.

By systematically deconstructing the played experience from an analytic auto-ethnographic perspective, these three chapters will illuminate the individual and medium (or form) specificity of the potential emergence of hybrid-identity in a networked system. This form of ‘close-reading’ (Bizzocchi & Tannebaum, 2001) will address a number of relevant findings that could not have otherwise been discovered through a less extensive, more generalized method of analysis of both the played and designed games.

Chapter six, “The Focus of Gameplay” will execute a comparative analysis of all three games to understanding the similarities and differences across the elements as categorized by the extended framework. This comparative analysis will demonstrate the



ways in which certain aspects of identity construction are technologically mediated, context specific, or individually experienced, or some combination of all three. Further analysis of the case studies as a group will illustrate new areas of focus that are required to be considered when working to understand the networked components that contribute to both gameplay and the emergence of different types of identity.

Finally, chapter seven, “(Re)Considering Hybrid-Identity” begins with a comparison of the three gameplay analyses to illustrate the different prominence levels of gameplay elements within each of the three games. This will open a discussion of the potential balance of elements necessary for hybrid-identity to emerge. Furthermore, this chapter will address hybrid-identity in a more general sense with a discussion on what the three game analyses tells us about hybrid-identity in general within single-player games. This chapter concludes by addressing the role and usefulness of the framework developed throughout this dissertation in determining the potentiality of the emergence of hybrid-identity.

## **Chapter 1: Concepts & Theories**

Fundamentally, videogames are an interdisciplinary media form. They combine aspects from the visual and literary arts, computer science, film, and animation. More than the sum of their technical parts, videogames exist, and are consumed, within a social and cultural context. As such, videogames can also be viewed from a sociological, psychological, philosophical, or a humanities perspective, to name but a few, depending on the goal of the research. Whether the focus is on the form or the content (or both), the study of videogames inherently requires multiple perspectives to adequately address their diversely complex nature.

In order to frame the perspectives that have informed the direction of this research, the following chapter will briefly define the core concepts that lie at the foundation of this dissertation. Drawing on the literature that has influenced my understanding of each, the first section will discuss the concepts of identity, identification, and representation culling from the fields of sociology and social psychology, media, and film studies. The second section will address theories of networked interactions through a brief discussion on cybernetic systems and Actor Network Theory (ANT). This chapter is intended to act as a general overview of these concepts, rather than an exhaustive review of the literature.

### **1.1 Identity**

As the primary focus of this research is to understand the process of (hybrid) identity construction in videogame play, understanding the concept of identity is fundamental. Yet it remains a complex, and multifaceted one. While it is a foundational idea in the fields of philosophy (where it is often referred to as theories of the ‘self’),

sociology, anthropology, and psychology to name only a few, there are notable definitional nuances across disciplines. Delineating these nuances will aid in focusing on the unique aspects within the process of identity construction in digitally mediated environments; and more specifically, in single-player videogames.

### **1.1.1 The Self**

As early as ancient Greek philosophy, the notion of the self in regards to developing one's inner identity and social consciousness has been a prominent component of an individual's life. In order to participate in social and civic life, the individual was required to take responsibility not only for their physical health, but also for their internal well-being. This responsibility to the 'internal self' included the development of ethics and morals, civic and social development as well as one's individual spiritual needs.

Drawing on this idea, Foucault (1988) discusses the notion of '*epimeleia heautou*', which means 'the care of oneself'; a self that is a separate entity from the physical being which required the individual to perform specific techniques such as journal writing, and meditation in order to be properly nurtured. These techniques were meant to be used as tools to unearth one's internal identity through reflections on moral and civic conduct, among other concerns. Through acts of writing, oral narration, and introspection, the care of self was intended to be a lifelong project, a dialogue of sorts between an individual and the world in which he lives.

Moving from maintaining the inner 'self' in order to participate meaningfully in civic life to focusing on the psychological aspects of the individual, psychology and psychoanalysis aims to understand the contexts and conditions of individual behaviour,

personality, emotional development, and overall well being. These themes are exemplified best in the works of Erikson (1959/1994), Freud (1923/1949), and Lacan (1949/1977). Erikson's research aimed to delineate the different stages of identity development spanning the life cycle of an individual. Freud developed the foundational theory on the human psyche which he divided into three parts, the id (the unconscious), the ego (conscious<sup>2</sup>), and the super-ego (the preconscious). According to Freud, the id was responsible for impulsive 'pleasure' seeking behaviours, the ego controlled realistic attainment of the id's desires, and finally, the super-ego is the part of the human psyche that is responsible for balancing morality and can be said to work to stabilize the individual within a social context.

Finally, Lacan is known for his contribution to Freud's psychoanalysis, including his introduction of the mirror stage which contributes to the development of the ego, his work on the differentiation between the Other/other, and for presenting the three orders of psychoanalysis; the imaginary, the symbolic and the real. Briefly, Lacan originally defined the mirror stage as a moment in human development between the ages of six and eighteen months when the child confronts their own reflection and begins to identify with the image as something that is exterior to themselves. Lacan later expanded this idea to refer to the dual nature of self as both simultaneously self and other that make up the formation of the ego through the process of identification. While their terminology and goals may have differed, their works aimed to find ways to understand the human psyche and develop the individual.

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<sup>2</sup> The ego functions in the conscious, preconscious and unconscious mind, but is what deals with reality.

Aspects of the self and understanding the functions of the psyche is central to traditional notions of identity as a human construct. However, the following dissertation focuses on expanding the scope of identity beyond the internal and external sense of self of the individual.

### **1.1.2 Sociology & Social Psychology**

The term “identity theory” that is used to encompass the literature and research around identity construction based on social contexts and interactions was said to be first presented in 1966, at the Annual American Sociological Association by Sheldon Stryker. However, it leans heavily on pre-existing theories of ‘symbolic interactionism’ drawing on Mead’s *Mind, Self & Society* (1934), Cooley’s *Human Nature and Social Order* (1902), and Goffman’s *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959). Within symbolic interactionism, identity is the result of a process of negotiation through social interaction in a cyclical ritual of perception, interpretation, and internalization where the individual determines their identity in a feedback process between the external world and their internal selves.

While Mead does discuss the ‘internal self’, it is a self that is concerned with appearances and expected norms in relation to the external social world, and how one internalizes what they believe is the expected response to an external influence. This is similar to Cooley’s ‘looking glass self’ and Lacan’s ‘mirror stage’ where the individual assesses interactions through the reflections of others and adjusts their behaviour in response. It is through the eyes of the ‘Other’ that the self is constructed. Whereas Goffman believed that there is no internal self, but only masks (or faces) that we put on according to

our social setting. Essentially, there is no private or internal self outside of social interactions. As Branaman (2003) notes, for Goffman, “the self is a product of performances in social situations” (p. 87). The self is a performed image that is dictated and controlled by the social situation for the social context and nothing more. As expressed in the following quote:

The self ... can be seen as something that resides in the arrangements prevailing in a social systems for its members. The self in this sense is not a property of the person to whom it is attributed, but dwells rather in the pattern of social control that is exerted in connection with the person by himself and those around him. This special kind of institutional arrangement does not so much support the self as constitute it (Goffman, 1961, p. 168).

In this sense, the self is a product of society, and social interactions between the individual and the social setting. It is not about a development of self for inner well being, or for philosophical enlightenment, but rather, for the maintenance of social conventions and norms.

The process of identification is a core aspect of symbolic interactionism. Following the idea developed in psychoanalytic theory that individuals develop their ‘self’ through relationships with an ‘other’, the process of identification in sociological terms focuses specifically with the social aspect of interaction and identification. Mead (1934) writes that “the process out of which the self arises is a social process...” (p. 164). Mead aims to move beyond the idea held in psychology that the self is an “...isolated and independent element,

a sort of entity that could conceivably exist by itself” (p. 164), by claiming that although this is conceivably possible, for him,

... the self has a sort of structure that arises in social conduct that is entirely distinguishable from this so-called subjective experience ... the self... arises when the conversation of gestures is taken over into the conduct of the individual form. When this conversation of gestures can be taken over into the individual's conduct so that the attitude of the other forms can affect the organism, and the organism can reply with its corresponding gesture and thus arouse the attitude of the other in its own process (p. 167).

In many ways, this is similar to what psychology would refer to as the mirror stage. The individual interacts with the ‘other’ and through a process of internalization, has made a part of the ‘other’ into a part of the self. In sociological terms, this is done solely on a social interaction. Through further developments of symbolic interactionism and sociology, this theory has moved to include the interactions with objects as well as with other individuals as can be seen in the works of McCarthy (1984) and Goffman (1959).

For Goffman, as previously explained, there was no self beyond that which existed in face to face social interactions. The whole process of identification is predicated on a sense of perception of how an individual views another's actions, internalizing that perception and attempting to project this ‘ideal’ self based on that particular social interaction. Once the interaction is terminated, and the individual is alone, there is no ability for this form of perception, therefore there is no ‘self’ to outwardly project. These are only two examples of the process of identification from a sociological perspective, but

they are both pertinent in respect to beginning to think about how individuals understand their interactions with various media.

In contemporary terms, identity is “the meanings that individuals hold for themselves – what it means to be who they are” (Burke, 2003). Within a social-psychological frame, according to Stryker & Burke (2000), there are three primary, yet distinct uses of the term identity; to refer to (a) “... the culture of a people” drawing “no distinction between identity, and for example, ethnicity”; (b) “to refer to common identification with a collective or social category”, often referred to social identity theory; and finally, (c) it is used “with reference to parts of the self composed of the meanings that persons attach to multiple roles they typically play in highly differentiated contemporary societies” (p. 284) These three uses for the term identity make up the bulk of the extensive work of both Stryker and Burke, albeit from two different perspectives. The following review is concerned primarily with the third use of the term, often referred to as ‘personal identity’.

According to Stryker and Burke, there are two strands of identity theory (within social-psychology), which both come out of what they call *structural symbolic interactionism* which encompasses each of their previous theoretical perspective on identity formation, where the goal:

... is to understand and explain how social structures affect the self, and how self affects social behaviors. The first aspect concentrates on examining how social structures affect the structure of the self and how structure of the self



influences social behavior, whereas the second concentrates on the internal dynamics of self-processes as these affect social behavior (p. 285).

In essence, this encapsulates the scope of social-psychological identity theory, defining the process as either internal or external to the individual. While this is true, one need not exclude the other. As identity theory has progressed, there has been an increased understanding that the process of identity construction requires both internal and external processes to be complete (Cerulo, 1997; Stryker & Burke, 2000). In this regard, identity is multifaceted, containing at least two aspects: our internal identity – how we perceive ourselves, and our external identity – how others perceive us. It is the merging of these two identities that ultimately makes up the whole ‘self’.

Yet, identity is not solely determined by the internalization/externalization process. It is also developed by the roles one fulfills in their everyday lives. This is formally seen in research on ‘role-theory’ (Parsons, 1965; Merton, 1957) and ‘role-identities’ (Burke, 2003; Thoits, 2003). Following these theories, identities are tied to one’s role – whether it be parent, spouse, banker, gamer, etc.; each role identity emerges when the context arises. Each role-identity has the potential to influence other role-identities. For example, being a parent might influence an individual’s role as a banker in the way they deal with customers; perhaps by being more compassionate in their interactions, or offering more guidance than a banker without children. The inter-play between different role-identities as a cumulative whole is what makes up the individual’s concept of self over time.

However, while internalized role-identities may create one’s ‘whole self’, this is not necessarily the case in the externalized, projected identity. The individual is not obliged to

outwardly share role-identities that are not necessary for any given social interaction. There is a level of compartmentalization that occurs. As individual roles become more prominent in an individual's life, the hierarchy changes, bringing different roles to the forefront of one's perception of self (Burke, 2003). Nonetheless, in each role situation, the individual still develops their identities based on the same cyclical internalization and externalization process described above. Essentially, "Identity formation can be conceptualized as an ongoing psychological process during which various characteristics of the self are internalized, labelled, valued, and organized" (Levine, 2003). Whether this occurs with a singular, unified self or a multifaceted compartmentalized version, the process remains the same.

Theories of post-modern identity challenge the notion of an inner-self that is constructed purely through a process of social interactions and social perceptions based on pre-existing social categories, and aims to "deconstruct(s) established identity categories and their accompanying rhetoric in an effort to explore the full range of 'being'" (Cerulo, 1997, p. 391). By deconstructing these categories, the individual is able to explore and (re)define their identity based on the position of the individual (Biesta, 1994). This deconstruction of identity categories results in a fragmented (or compartmentalized) self with no core center; in postmodern terms, this is not necessarily a bad thing. Identity is an invention; a consciously constructed identity that aims to reflect the individual in multiple aspects of the self. Biesta (1994) acknowledges that "identity has become an invention" (p. 1). As Bauman (2004) iterates, "identity should be considered an ongoing process of redefining oneself and of the invention and reinvention of one's own history" (p. 7). He

continues to say that “... the question of identity needs to concern itself once again with what it really is; a socially necessary convention” (p. 7).

### **1.1.2 Cyberspace & Identity**

The idea of redefining and reinventing oneself is amplified in digital spaces. Mediated by networked digital technologies, the Internet has been a space that has enabled people to connect with each other based purely on interest, removing the need for geographical proximity to one’s social interactions (Rheingold, 1993/2000). As individuals log on to the Internet, they are not bound by the identities they hold in their everyday lives. Upon first entering such digital spaces, it is common for a user to not know anyone in the digital communities they explore. This allows a freedom of expression often unheard of in one’s day to day lives. Early online interactions in the 1980’s were often text based, enabling the individual to (share) who they are through descriptive vocabulary – they were not tied to images and representations.

Early works on identity and digital technology discuss the idea of the Internet as a place where people could experiment with their identities due to the anonymous nature of the early internet (Donath, 1999; Haya, 2006; Turkle, 1995/1997). As Turkle writes in *Life on the Screen* (1995), “the internet has become a significant social laboratory for experimenting with the constructions and reconstructions of self that characterize post-modern life. In its virtual reality, we self-fashion and self-create” (p. 180). She goes on to say that “virtual environments are valuable as places where we can acknowledge our inner diversity. But we still want an authentic experience of self” (p. 254).

As a social space, the internet allows people to explore alternative identities,

different from their everyday, daily lives. “When identity was defined as unitary and solid, it was relatively easy to recognize and censure deviation from a norm. A more fluid sense of self allows a greater capacity for acknowledging diversity” (p. 261). With the anonymous nature of the internet, norm deviations are relatively difficult to distinguish, further separating the user’s online identity play from their everyday identities, yet one could argue that these deviations are part of the identity exploration (and construction) process that is necessary for development (Simpson, 2005).

In her critique of ‘identity tourism’, Nakamura (1995) addresses the issue of race and gender in cyberspace. With the lack of a physical body online that is directly connected to the user, the user can explore versions of the self, for a range of reasons, that would not otherwise be possible in one’s physical, everyday life. Highlighting Nakamura’s work here is intended to illustrate the shifting boundaries of how people explore identity and what it means in a digitally connected social world. The internet, and other digitally mediated spaces such as videogames, both on and offline, offers individuals an environment where they can experience race, gender, and behaviours in ways that is not possible without the same (potential) repercussions in their everyday lives.

Digitally mediated interactions remove the individual away from the body as an identity tool (Haraway, 1991; Robinson, 2007). From this perspective, it could be argued that identity construction (and development) is one step removed from the individual proper, allowing them to create an entity outside themselves to represent the identity they are aiming to project. Whether this is in descriptive text form, or through the creation of a visual avatar, the individual goes through the same identity construction processes

described above, only with a (buffer) between themselves, and those they are interacting with. In such instances, there is often little obligation to reveal one's physical, every day identity online.

The disconnect between the individual and their online identity is increasingly diminishing. With the rising popularity of social networking sites, individuals often share details of their personal lives in order to keep in touch with friends and family, even connecting their 'real life' social networked selves with other online identities. With these changes, there is an increasing tendency for websites to connect users physical reality to their online spaces<sup>3</sup>. However, as the internet and digitally mediated social interactions become more and more integrated into people's everyday lives, it is necessary move beyond the idea that the internet is a place that anonymity rules social interactions. As Helen Kennedy iterates:

the time has come ... to move away from a preoccupation with the generalized, enduring claim that internet identities are anonymous, multiple and fragmented-not only because, in some cases, online identities are continuous with offline selves, but also, more importantly, because common uses of the concept of anonymity are limited as starting points for carrying out analyses of internet experiences (2006, p. 1).

While individuals who socialize and play online create identity in a disembodied space, they still have the online community to negotiate their identity with, the same way

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<sup>3</sup> For an example of this, see the Blizzard deal that would have initially connected gamers' profiles to their Facebook profiles (<http://kotaku.com/5531740/starcraft-ii-hooks-up-with-facebook>), Fahey, May 5, 2010.

they would have to do in their physical communities. As described above, social norms and expectations are contextualized and reconsidered in accordance to the particular contexts, so while identity construction may be more fluid and open, and the conditions may be different online, the cyclical process of identity construction often remains the same. What has changed is that the individual now has more possibilities to explore, create, and re-create identities in a range of realistic and fantastic environments that expand beyond the physical body.

While user's have the opportunity to step outside of their corporeal bodies in cyberspace, the body has been reintroduced as digital technologies have developed (video cards and processing power), enabling individuals to create avatars, upload images of themselves, etc. Virtual worlds such as *Second Life* allow for users to create their avatars from the ground up, enabling players to express their identity in a myriad of ways. While the system is not perfect, there are still issues surrounding the lack of range of skin tones for example, users are able to express themselves with seemingly limitless boundaries (even beyond being human). Yet, even with such freedom, online user's appear to gravitate to the anthropomorphic form, and usually in an idealized form (Martey & Consalvo, 2010).

### **1.1.3 Videogames & Identity**

When considering theories of identity in the context of videogames, the literature is often focused on theories of representation (which will be further discussed in the section on representation) and customization, and how the interplay between these two things influences a player's personal identity (Blinka, 2008; Gee, 2007; Waggonner, 2009). In most videogames, the player takes on the role of a pre-designed avatar. As players often do

not ‘create’ their avatar from the ground up, identity in videogames is often more of an act of appropriation than one of complete creation. In this manner, identity is imposed on the player through the narrative and aesthetic of the avatar they are required to play, potentially influencing the player’s identity. Without the social interactions found in multi-player online role-playing games, identity construction in single-player videogame play occurs predominantly through the individual player’s gameplay decisions and actions. This will be illustrated in chapters three through six.

The idea of creation of self in digital space is further developed by Rehak (2003) when he discusses the use of the visual representation of an ‘avatar’ in video games as a form of ‘Playing at Being’. The avatar is “...presented as a human player’s double, merges spectatorship and participation in ways that fundamentally transform both activities” (p. 103). In videogames that enable avatar creation such as role-playing games, by being able to create a visual representation, the player is not only able to play with their perceptions of self and their internalized concept of identity, but are also able to visually alter how they choose to represent themselves without any tangible, physical changes to their everyday, physical selves. In videogames, the player not only develops their own personal identity, an identity which is mediated through an external form of an avatar (or player-character), but they also have the ability to develop the avatar as a separate, external being, outside of their ‘selves’. The definition and boundaries of the avatar and player-character will be discussed further in chapter two.

From this brief summary on the history of personal identity theories across several disciplines, we can see several common factors in regards to the process of identity

construction; it requires some degree of reflective internalization of influencing factors by the individual. Identity is then projected through external means such as behaviour, language, fashion, and social affiliations whether in the individual's physical world or their digitally mediated interactions.

## 1.2 Identification

According to the *Oxford American Dictionary*, identification is a noun that is defined as “attribution to yourself (consciously or unconsciously) of the characteristics of another person (or groups of persons)”. This definition is often carried over and elaborated through multiple disciplines with various alterations to the relationship between self and ‘other’ depending on the disciplinary purpose. As we have just seen, a large part of identity construction is founded on the act of internalization aspects that are external to the self. In this way, ‘identification’ is an inherent part of this process. As such, I will briefly explore the conceptual roots of identification from the fields sociology (Mead, 1934; Goffman, 1959), psychology (Freud, 1940/1989), and film studies (Cohen, 2001; Freidberg, 1990; Stam 1992) in order to demonstrate how the process of identification has been appropriated and actualized in games studies (Murray, 1997; Taylor, 2003).

The origin of the concept of identification is most often attributed to Freud's theories in psychoanalysis focused on defining the production and development of the ego, id and superego; essentially, the self. Specifically, Chalaquist describes Freud's definition of identification as:

an early, primitive kind of attachment to an object which results in incorporating some of its aspects into oneself. Ego and superego make use



of identification to attract libido away from objects and toward themselves, thereby building up the personality. Other types include narcissistic, goal-oriented, object-loss, and aggressor identification (2001, Chalquist).

There are multiple types of identification within this definition, however, for the sake of contextual brevity, I will only address the first (primary identification), second (narcissistic identification), and the fourth ('tertiary' or partial) identification.

The basic premise of primary identification is that when we are confronted with an object or individual for the first time, there is a form of 'emotional attachment' to it/them that is not based on any prior knowledge. In very loose terms, through this primary (or one could say, introductory) level of identification, the individual creates an association of the other by connecting it/them to themselves. The most common example is that of a child and their relationship with their mother (and parents). In the early stages, a child cannot distinguish the difference between themselves and their mother. Fundamentally, the child sees the mother as an extension of themselves due to the emotional attachment and physical relationship. Therefore the child adopts the characteristics of the mother. This is not to say that the child functions in pure mimicry – as mimicry insinuates a conscious act of copying – but rather they cannot distinguish between the self and other because the relationship between themselves and the mother is an emotional and unconscious one. As such, it could be said that the relational object's actions are essentially their own through adoption of the 'other' within the self. For Freud, this is where the (super) ego developed. It is only through the second stage of identification does a child (or any person) begin to experience a separation between self and other.

### 1.2.1 Identification & Film

Friedberg contextualizes Freud's theories of identification within the context of film in her chapter "A Denial of Difference: Theories of Cinematic Identification" (1990) where she succinctly summarizes secondary – or narcissistic identification – stating that it is the “regressive way it becomes substitute for a libidinal object-tie’ which replaces an abandoned or lost object by means of introjection” (p. 38). This is the stage in which the individual has the capacity to understand that the object or ‘other’ is outside of themselves. By identifying with it, the individual is able to reconcile this separation by embodying characteristics of the ‘other’.

Finally, tertiary (partial) identification is the process where an individual identifies with the ‘other’ based on a common element between both self and other. This form of identification is wholly based on perception, and consequently is often tied to visual identification (although not explicitly). Friedberg asserts that according to Freud, this is how social groups are formed; tertiary identity is the basis for “herd instinct” (p. 38). She further explains how Lacan reformulated Freud's conception of ‘object-relations’ by insisting that the visual aspect of tertiary identification is indeed the most important (Friedberg, 1990). For the purpose of using theories of identification to understand the spectator's cinematic experience, this is an important reformulation. Although this dissertation focuses on videogames specifically, theories of filmic identification are an important part of the definitional lineage.

The concept of identification in reference to film spectatorship is drawn heavily from theories of psychoanalysis, predominantly – but not exclusively from the works of

Freud and later through the works of Lacan. In terms of the spectator primary identification, Metz (1975) explains that "... the spectator *identifies with himself*, as a pure act of perception (as wakefulness, alertness): as condition of possibility of the perceived and hence a kind of transcendental subject, anterior to every *there is*" (p. 49). In other words, the spectator has to identify with himself (and his scope of information) in order to contextualize the text (in all of its forms) on the screen. This explains both the primary and secondary identification; the initial contact with the film as the primary form, and the identifying with the events and characters on the screen as the secondary form of identification. What makes the cinematic process of identification different than a purely psychoanalytic process is that the film is a constructed, fixed form. The reflection the spectator sees is false. As Metz explains, although the initial act of perception occurs through the initial act of identification,

during the showing we are, like the child, in a sub-motor and hyper-perceptive state; because like the child again, we are prey to the imaginary, the double, and are so paradoxically through a real perception. Very different because this mirror returns us everything but ourselves because we are wholly outside it, whereas the child is both in it and in front of it (p. 49).

Friedberg (1990) outlines the historical appropriation of identification in film studies, with her description of *pre-cinematic identification*, which includes pre-Freudian ideas based on hysterical identification as well as suggestion the concept of displacement, incorporation, introjection along with ideas of narcissism and ego development. Friedberg then moves on to describe *cinematic identification* which focuses on the secondary and

tertiary (partial) identification based on the acknowledgement or understanding that the film is an entity outside oneself as well as the importance of the visual within the process of identification. Finally, Freidberg discusses what she calls *extra-cinematic identification* which is based on the cinematic experience after the initial viewing. This extra-cinematic identification occurs in instances such as marketing, ‘systems of commodification’ and “external relationships with the film’s characters (and stars) in a sense of fascination” (p. 43).

As Stam (1992) states, during the process of identification “the film spectator both loses him/herself and re-finds him/herself – over and over – by continually reenacting the first fictive moment of identification and establishment of identity” (p.152) creating a type of identification feedback loop. Within this ‘feedback loop process’, there are several things going on at once: the initial visual intake of the film, the internal processing that includes searching for (and hopefully the finding) a commonality that the spectator can associate with and return to the filmic text.

Another aspect of the filmic experience that is important in terms of the process of identification (and other forms of immersive media) is the necessity for the spectator to accept the fact that what they are seeing is a fictive entity while simultaneously given into its existence in order for the process of identification to proceed. In this sense, the concept of identification is defined as an “... *imaginative experience* in which a *person surrenders consciousness* [emphasis added] of his or her own identity and experiences the world through someone else’s point of view” (Cohen, 2001, p.248). This quote bears two important ideas that have been appropriated widely by film and video game scholars;

firstly, that of *imaginative experience* which can be seen as an internal process which is defined by the interaction between self and ‘other’ – or as described above, an interaction between the primary and secondary levels of identification. Secondly, in the case of film and video games, the ‘other’ in this imaginative experience is the constructed fictional world that a spectator can relate to.

In order for a spectator to ‘relate’ to the experience they must *surrender consciousness* of their actual, physical reality. In the case of both film and game studies, this surrendering of consciousness is often referred to as Coleridge’s ‘suspension of disbelief’; where a spectator accepts the events on the screen as ‘real’ in order to identify with the characters, context and narrative of the medium. Here, the concept of ‘imaginative experience’ indicates that it is an internal process. One must draw on their imagination in order to experience the events they are exposed to. However, it is important not to view this ‘suspension of disbelief’ or ‘surrendered consciousness’ as a fully achievable occurrence as we can never truly escape our corporeal selves. We can lose ourselves in a film or become immersed in a game, but we can never ‘be’ the character.

That being said, according to Gaut (1999), “*a suspension of disbelief*” [emphasis added] is where:

the spectator believes that she is not the fictional character, but that belief is somehow bracketed from her motivational set. In such cases, the spectator reacts *as if* [emphasis added] she believes that she is the character depicted, even though she does not in fact believe this to be the case (p. 202).

Following this line of thinking, even though one cannot separate themselves from their physical self, there is a point during viewing that the spectator steps outside of what they know to be ‘real’ and accepts the fictional context as being (relatively) real. There is a level of simultaneous happening between conscious belief and subconscious action, allowing the spectator to believe that they are the character. In this sense, we can see this bracketing as a form of space that exists between the spectator and the film where the negotiation of primary and secondary identification occurs.

This idea carries over into game studies, but is elaborated on to acknowledge the shift in media form from spectatorship to active player. Murray (1997) reiterates the idea that gameplay, like film viewing, requires the suspension of disbelief. However, she argues that this is too passive a formulation even for traditional media. When we enter a fictional world, we do not merely ‘suspend’ a critical faculty; we also exercise a creative faculty. We do not suspend disbelief so much as we actively *create* belief.” (p. 110). This infers a conscious choice of the spectator/player to the forefront of the process of identification.

This ‘creative faculty’ is an element that potentially distinguishes the filmic from the gamic experience. Not necessarily making them distinct processes, but rather they are unique to their medium (or forms) in that games offer a broader opportunity to exercise this ‘creative faculty’ in an active fashion. This follows the previously mentioned idea of identification in sociological (and psychoanalytic) terms, but relating it now specifically to act of play. In *Mind, Self & Society* (1934), Mead writes that:

when distinguishing play from game, as opposed to the solitary nature of play, participating in a game requires that a child anticipates what others will

do in response to his or her actions. By doing so, the child practices the ability to take on the perspective of others, which eventually allows him/her to internalize the perspective of the '*generalized other*', that is to identify with a community or group (p. 248).

Therefore, identification is central to this concept of anticipatory play. A player must be able to identify with those that they are playing with, as well as the objects with which they are playing in order to understand what is required of them in order for the game to continue.

What makes this interesting in terms of videogames is that the 'others' in the instance of solo games, is a pre-designed artificial intelligence (AI) that the player must anticipate. They must calculate the actions of their character they are navigating by internalizing the process of identification and projecting it outwards in the form of active (and anticipatory) play. This is the internalization process that Mead talks about that allows for a game to occur. Instead of the process benefiting the identification within a social group, we can extrapolate it to understand how the process allows a player to anticipate and in turn increase their playing skills within the game.

Sympathy and empathy are examples of two emotions which occur through identification. In his article titled "Empathy and (Film) Fiction" (1996), Neill explains the role of sympathy within the context of identification, "... with sympathetic response, in feeling *for* another, *one's response need not reflect what the other is feeling* [emphasis added], nor indeed does it depend on whether the other is feeling anything at all..." (pp.175-6). This can be related to Gaut's idea of bracketing oneself from the fictive

moment where the spectator understands that the film and its characters are indeed fictional yet they react to them on an emotional – sympathetic – level nonetheless.

In the sympathetic process, the spectator is lead to feel sympathy *for* the character's on screen. Sympathy – as a human emotion – is based in identification since the spectator must be able to relate to the action on the screen in some manner in order to feel sympathy for the fictional situation. In this sense, the spectator must identify with the events and character on the screen through the process of primary identification which requires reflection on their position as a spectator, their perception of the filmic event and then relate it to the event on the screen through the process of secondary identification. Through this relationship between the spectator and the fiction, the spectator can feel sympathy for the character even though they do not actually feel the emotion depicted on the screen.

It is also possible for an individual to feel empathy in terms of the characters on the screen. As Neill writes, “in contrast, responding emphatically to another, I come to *share* [emphasis added] his feelings, to feel *with* [emphasis added] him; if he is in an emotional state, to empathize with him is to experience the emotion(s) that he experiences” (pp. 175-6). This is different than sympathy in that it is not that the spectator/player feels *for* the character on the screen, but rather they feel the emotions as if they were their own. The concept of empathy and its role in the process of identification brings us back the idea that the suspension of disbelief is attached to the notion of *acting ‘as if’ one is the character*.

Empathetic response lies within the primary level of identification, where the spectator is not able to recognize the separation between on-screen character and self. However, in order to feel the same emotion as the character, one must recognize the signs



of that emotion and have had experience with it on a personal level, insinuating that it occurs during the process of secondary identification. This can be correlated to Metz's work on the connection between this primary level of filmic identification and Freud's work on consciousness and dreams (Metz, 1977).

Both gameplay and film spectatorship offer different processes of identification that each have the potential to expand the spectator/player's experience, and therefore their identity. As Cohen iterates, "identification leads to the (temporary) adoption of an external point of view and to viewing the world through an alternative social reality" (Cohen, 2001, p. 248). The process of identification allows people to situate themselves in the role of the 'other'. This external point of view enables them to experience an alternative social reality that further allows them to explore elements of themselves that would otherwise not be explored (or challenged). Through each cycle of the identification process, the stage in which the individual internalizes this external point of view and social reality is where identity is formed – consciously or subconsciously depending on which school of thought adopted.

The process of identification occurs in one's everyday lives through the people they meet, the social groups they interact with and the technologies they consume as has been demonstrated throughout this section. By highlighting the theoretical history of identification in film, its importance in one's relationship with both film and videogames has been briefly illustrated. The images that the spectator identifies with play an equally important role within the process of identification.

## **1.3 Representation & Meaning**

The word ‘representation’ means, simply, to re-present, inferring that it is a ‘copy’ with its meaning outside the represented object (image, text, etc) itself. Meaning is therefore ascribed to that which is being represented through a multitude of ways, depending on the object, context, and perspective. Succinctly stated, “representation connects meaning and language to culture” (Hall, 1997, p. 15). Literature on theories of representation can be found in almost every field of study from the hard sciences to the humanities, social sciences, and visual arts. As this research is focused on the individual’s relationship with the ‘avatar’ on the screen during videogame play, often referred to as a representation of the player, the following section will concentrate on theories of visual representation from a cultural studies perspective focusing specifically on media studies, film studies, and game studies.

### **1.3.1 Cultural Studies**

Beginning with the broadest of the three perspectives, cultural studies is an broad field of study that aims to critically comprehend contemporary culture and society through a wide range of lenses including sociology, political economy, communications, social, literary, and media theories as well as film studies, cultural anthropology, and philosophy. In regards to understanding representation through cultural studies, there are overarching themes of the construction, transmission, and ‘reading’ of meaning within social structures and cultural contexts that are valuable in grasping the more medium specific theories of representation, reception, and meaning.

Discussing the historical perspectives on the creation and reading of representational meaning as it refers to understanding reality (or the real), Ebert (1986) outlines three 'representational ways of making sense' of reality in his article "The Crisis of Representation in Cultural Studies: Reading in post-modern texts". These are representational, significatory, and post-representational theories. Briefly, 'representational' theories "are based on the belief that meaning of signs, such as words and images, lies not in the signs themselves, but in the objects, ideas, and actions to which they refer, which they represent" (p. 895). From this perspective, meaning is said to derive its 'nature' and refers to 'external entities'. This is to say that meaning is not in the sign, but rather in that which the representation is referring to. 'Significatory' theories of representation aim to counter this perspective, in claiming that "'reality' ... is not what exists outside signifying systems, but that which is constituted through them" (p. 895). From this perspective, meaning is created *through* the "signifying systems" which meaning passes through and does not lie in either the representation or the reality it is said to represent. Meaning is in the systematic process, not the sign or the real. As Ebert iterated, in this perspective "everything is signification and signification is all we know about reality" (895). Finally, 'post-representational' theories "no longer accept the relation between representations and their referents in the world outside of language as natural and unmediated by sign-systems and at the same time do not completely abandon the necessity of 'reference' and of 'real' entities capable of limiting the dispersion and self-referentiality of signifying systems" (p. 895). This perspective is not the result of 'synthesising' the first two, but rather aims to

situate the two ‘opposing’ ones face to face. In essence, post-representational theories juxtaposes both perspectives within the same conceptual frame.

Focusing on how representation is tied to meaning and language, in his book *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices*, Hall (1997) describes three broad theories of representation within cultural studies that appear to follow Ebert’s historical overview. They are reflective, intentional, and constructivist or constructive theories of representation. The ‘reflective’ theory of representation follows that meaning “lies in the object, person, idea, or event in the real world, and language acts as a mirror, to reflect the true meaning as it already exists in the world” (p. 24). In this sense, language simply reflects reality inferring that meaning is inherent to the object. While the ‘intentional’ theory of representation is that “... words mean what the author intends they should mean” (p. 25). In this context, meaning is infused by the author, essentially opposing the reflective theory. Finally, the ‘constructivist’ or ‘constructive’ theory of representation follows that it is that “... neither things in themselves nor the individual users of language can fix meaning in language” (p. 25). As Hall iterated, in the constructive theory of representation “things don’t *mean*, we construct meaning, using representational systems – concepts and signs” (p. 25). The material and symbolic are inherently separate, and it is through context and systems that meaning is constructed. Following the constructive perspective, one could argue that “meaning is communicated by conventions” (Lacey, 1998; p. 132). Conventions that are created through social norms and historical contexts, shifting meaning over time.

As both Ebert and Hall outline, albeit with a different set of terminology and slightly altered scope, the origins of meaning through representation have different theories depending on which perspective one ascribes to. Looking to understand the modes of representation in the video games, it is possible draw on the two similar models described above to help frame the ways in which meaning is attributed and communicated in the audio/visual form; a form that is inherently a construct of the producer of the representation.

In visually driven media forms, the image that is projected to the individual is created to deliver a particular effect. Whether it is for advertising, television, film, or videogames, the images that are conveyed are not haphazard. Meaning is embedded into the images to fit particular narrative purposes, genre conventions, etc. In this respect, media images are purely ‘post- representational’ or ‘constructive’ in their meaning. While individually, the images and sounds may have an indexical relationship to the object or text they are re-presenting, it is in their assembled form does meaning become fully formed.

Following a constructive media perspective, Lacey (1998) outlines and expands on a typography of representation originally presented by film theorist Dyer in his essay “Taking Popular Television Seriously” (1985):

1. *Representation* – this consists essentially of media language, the conventions which are used to represent the world to the audience;
2. *Being representative of* – the extent to which types are used to represent social groups - this is dealt with here in a consideration of stereotypes;

3. *Who is responsible for the representation, how the institution creating a media text influences representation* – this is particularly contentious in the representation of gender, as it is often men who are doing the representing;
4. *What does the audience think is being represented to them* – ... audiences can make different readings from media texts from the one offered (p. 131).

These four points sketch out the hierarchy of meaning making and understanding associated with mediated representation within a contemporary cultural context. It is important to be aware of who is creating the representation, what their position is within the larger social context. For example, in video game design, it is known that the industry is predominantly young white males – this is brought to the forefront of discussions on in-game characters often falling within certain stereotypical perimeters of sexism and machismo (Taylor, 2003). While the image that is projected to the player may appear to be of one thing (a strong, barbarian female), the embedded meaning may be another (female barbarians are strong, physically fit, taut and buxom) even though the perceived meaning may be an entirely different one depending on the receptor based on their scope of understanding and meaning based on their own perceptions and ideological background (to be a strong barbarian female, you must be taut and buxom). The cultural context of the meaning may be completely disconnected from the intentional meaning, created by the producer of the image.

### **1.3.2 Meaning, Representation & Semiotics in Film**

One of the most prominent fields centered around theories of representation, according to the Oxford American Dictionary, semiotics which is a discipline that focuses on the ‘study of signs and symbols and their use or interpretation’ follows a ‘significatory’ or ‘reflective’ theory of representation. Semiotics has been applied to film studies through the works of Sol Worth (1968), Christian Metz (1974), and Anne Friedberg (1990) among others, to deconstruct and analyse the individual cinematic elements (signs or units) that produce meaning. According to Worth (1968), “a semiotic ‘attempts to develop a language in which to talk about signs’” (p. 3). Worth further articulates that “in conceptualizing film from a semiotic standpoint, it becomes quite clear that one of the basic suppositions employed by de Saussure, Morris, Sebeok, and others is the notion of a relationship between signs themselves and between signs and their users and context” (p. 6). At the same time he reminds the reader that “a sign is not a phenomenon in and of itself; a ‘thing’ becomes a sign only because it has a specific relationship to other ‘things’” (p. 6). It is how these ‘things’ are situated and juxtaposed with other ‘things’ within the technical production of a film that embeds images and movement with meaning both intended and perceived.

While film semiotics is a valid approach to understanding representation and meaning within a film, it is one of many. This method has been equally contested as being too narrow, focusing only on the signifier-signified relationship in regards to the “conventional and symbolic aspects of signs” (Prince, 1993,16). Theorists such as Prince believe that film analysis should consider the range of theories of representation in order to

enable a broader reading of film (as text). Prince warns that to lean too heavily on any one aspect of analysis, whether cultural, or symbolic, is to limit analysis. He suggests focusing on the “iconic and mimetic nature of pictorial signs” that would allow film theories to be “more sensitive to the unique, constitutive features of pictorial – as opposed to linguistic – modes of communication” (p. 16). It is clear that whichever position one takes, the lines of distinction fall along the general theories described above by Ebert and Hall.

Once films are produced, they become static entities confined to their constructed beginning, middle, and end. Although a thousand spectators across decades can view the same film, the produced meaning of the film does not change (unless of course, the producer creates updated versions, sequels, etc.). While meaning is built into film and its representations, it is created through the active spectatorship of each individual spectator.

### **1.3.3 Meaning, Representation & Semiotics In Videogames**

Videogames push this notion of audience perception through interaction to some extent as they allow players to interact with the content on the screen, potentially altering the meaning of the representations based on context. While the content the player accesses is pre-determined, existing within the boundaries of the code the games are writing in, confined to the disks and hard drives that they are stored in, depending on the genre of the videogame, players have a range of agency that allows them to alter the content, and sometimes even the images they play with within the context of the game.

There are several dominant threads within the game studies literature centered on the construction of representation and meaning. The issue of stereotypes as a mode of communication of meaning has been debated heavily in the areas of race and gender and



what meaning(s) the constructed images convey to the player (Ivory, 2006; Leonard, 2006; Williams, Martins, Consalvo & Ivory, 2009). Hyper-sexualized female characters and hyper masculine male characters dominate the video game character landscape, often with a minimal range of racial diversity (Downs & Smith, 2010). This is not to say that there are not exceptions, but the predominant player-character (or avatar) often represents an ideal form within the fictional context of the game's narrative. Racial minorities are often portrayed in stereotypical roles, often negatively presented as can be seen in Rock Star's *Grand Theft Auto* series for example. As an interactive medium, the limited range of characters and contexts represented is questioned, asking what message (or meaning) is being conveyed by the production and distribution of limited representations (Kafai, Heeter, Denner and Sun, 2008; Williams, Martins, Consalvo, and Ivory, 2009).

In games that do offer a wider range of options, the range is still limited by the code and the culture that surrounds videogames. The literature is not only concerned with what the images convey on a visual level, but what they represent on a social and cultural level. To what extent do images and representations in videogames influence cultural and ideological positions, and on a micro level, player identity (Dill, Brown, & Collins, 2007)? As videogame theory is highly interdisciplinary, these issues (among others concerning representation) are viewed through a range of theoretical approaches depending on the particular research interest.

Similar to film studies, video games have been analysed through a semiotic lens (Compagno & Coppock, 2008; Lindley, 2005; Myers, 2003) to investigate the interconnection between the cultural, structural, and technical aspects of video gameplay

and design. As Ferri (2007) articulates “ between playing a game and enjoying a narration there is a semiotic and semantic common ground: interpretation and meaning-making” (p. 1). Depending on the research area (design, player perceptions, cultural implications, etc.), there must be a theory established to understand the videogame as interactive form, allowing for the shifting of meaning as players are able to alter representations through gameplay and customization.

In order to push the modes of analysis further, Ferri argues that due to the interactive nature of videogames, we need to move from viewing them purely as a text, and reconsider them as an “interactive matrix” or as a “game-text”, an idea that dates back to Aarseth’s 1997 seminal book *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. While Aarseth focused predominantly on hypertext, his work addressed the issue that this type of distinction is necessary for a more medium specific analysis, enabling the disentangling of the perception of videogames as traditional a ‘texts’ which are stable in its expression from ‘interactive matrices’ “whose function is to produce single, small textual fragments” (Ferri, 2007, p. 3). Videogames (and hypertexts) are more fluid in their reception and change depending on a range of input factors, therefore potentially destabilizing meaning; or at least altering the possible meaningful outcomes.

In his book *The Nature of Videogames: Play as semiotics* (2003) Myers works towards developing a semiotic language in order to develop a method of understanding the interactive nature of videogame play. As he states in his introduction, “play and replay has *cognitive* and *recursive* qualities that, in association with a common representational form, position games and gaming as *semiotic* objects and processes” (Myers, 2003, p.7).

While the notion of interactivity has been touted as the distinguishing factor between filmic spectatorship and game playing, in a semiotic perspective, Myers asks: “Is ‘interactive’ play a meaningful classification of computer gameplay? Does it help us distinguish between play and nonplay? Is it even true, in general, that new communication media are more interactive than old? And, if so, how does interactivity associated with a particular communication medium affect signification during electronic gameplay?” (p. 74). Looking beyond interactivity as a simple interaction between form and function, or in the case of videogames, between the player input/game response cycle of gameplay, Myers addresses these questions through reframing the perimeters of the term to include not only form and function (the two poles of general and social semiotic theory), but context as well (p. 79).

There exists a tension between the producers of representation and meaning in digital media and the reception of these representations. Each play an equal role in how the representations and meaning are delivered, received and embodied in a larger cultural context, making Ebert & Hall’s overarching theories of representation as described above and Lacey’s overview of Dyer’s typography of meaning making in media applicable theories of analysis in understanding the process of meaning-making from both the producer and the audience’s perspectives.

Nonetheless, videogame analysis is still very much driven by the rules and boundaries of the researcher’s discipline, making the theories and methods of analysis as diverse as there are researchers. However, it is important to be able to ground video game representation theories in established social media theories, while remaining open to the

possibility of future developments as video games expand in their technical scope and cultural importance.

## **1.4 Technology & Networked Systems**

The ways in which humans interact with technology, and how these interactions influence the concept of the self, the nature of sociality, and culture as a whole have been theorized and debated across disciplines and contexts. Challenging the primacy of the physical body, theories of human computer interaction seeks to define the boundaries of the body (fixed or fluid) and the position it holds within the larger process of interaction. There is a common notion that there is a disconnect between the human and virtual body. However, as theories of digital mediation from the humanities, visual, and computational arts have aimed to demonstrate, the relationship is not so much as one of an alienation, but rather of an extension of the body.

By briefly contextualizing theories of embodiment and digital media (Hansen, 2006), post-humanism (Hayles, 1999), and social / system theories (Latour, 2005), this section will build a conceptual foundation that I can draw upon throughout my research and game analysis. By doing so, it will be possible to construct an analytical theory to further understand the player/avatar relationship. In looking beyond the individual human agent as the center of action, I aim to define the proposed concept of hybrid-identity throughout this dissertation as something that is not inherently bound by the human body, but is an integral part of a process of interactions which leads to new forms of identity.

The notion that the physical body is removed from virtual interactions has been common throughout the literature on human computer interaction and internet studies

(Boler, 2007; Featherstone & Burrows, 1996; Harraway, 1991). While it is common sense considering the fact that the individual exists outside of the screen, manipulating and controlling actions within the digital space; one's physical body cannot *actually* be *in* the virtual world. However, there is always a connection between the physical body and virtual space through the very nature of human computer interaction. In his book *Bodies in Code*, Hansen (2006) focuses on the body in relation to digitally mediated spaces in order to "revalue the meaning and role accorded to the body within the accepted conceptual frameworks of our philosophical tradition" (p. 7). Drawing on examples of digital and mixed reality art installations and the philosophical works of Merleau-Ponty, Hansen aims to demonstrate the ways in which the "(fundamentally motile) *body-schema*/fundamentally visual) *body-image*" ( p. 20) function towards both observational and operational modes of being from both a physical and perceptual perspective.

Simply stated, it is through both the physical sense and our visual sense of self that we learn our bodies; not only through its physicality, but through an external comprehension of self through visual images of our body. By understanding the relationship between the body-schema and the body-image, we are able to look at visual imaging and forms of representation as more than representation in a 'signified-signifier' perspective, and instead, view it as an equal technic of knowing the self. In viewing the virtual experience as a motile and tactile extension of self instead of a separation of body from perceived (untouchable) images, the scope of self expands, broadening its field of perception and understanding. As Hansen further explains, "in this way, digital technologies lend support to a phenomenological account of embodiment and expose the

technical element that has always inhabited and mediated our embodied coupling with the world” (p. 26).

Furthering the idea that the physical body is the source of mediation, Hansen states that “... the motile or ‘phenomenal’ body, the body as body schema, precedes and informs the constitution of the objective domain (including the body as object, or the body image) and the correlative demarcation of the subjective” (p. 40). In thinking of the body as the primary source of mediation, digital (and virtual) interactions become simply yet another interaction outside the physical self. When considering the role of the digital avatar in this schema, we can turn to Hansen’s recapitulation of Merleau-Ponty’s example of the blind man’s stick as an object outside of the physical body that mediates the blind man’s interactions with the world in a way that becomes an extension of the blind man. However, while the stick is an extension, it is that which mediates sensual perception between the blind man and the physical world; “the stick does not function as an explicit, cognitively assessable enhancement of the body image, but rather as an immediately practical, unthematizable expansion of the body scheme” (p. 43).

Moving closer towards the relationship to the body within virtual environments (here, Hansen is discussing virtual reality environments that use the body to create movement within the virtual spaces), Hansen explains that “the perceptual differentiation between self-representation (body-image) and enactive spatialization (body-schema) can no longer be made in virtual environments ... the reason is not simply that the prosthetic function is so fundamental that it has an impact on the visual or representational body image as well the motile body schema, but rather *that the difference between them – and*

*with it, the role of representation* – has been entirely effaced” (p. 49). In the case of spaces of virtual reality that uses the body’s movement to interact with the virtual space, the body becomes both schema and image at the simultaneously.

While one could argue that there is a difference between virtual reality environments seen in art installations where the whole body is immersed in the sensorial experience and digitally mediated environments such as video games where the body is connected primarily through audio-visual means coupled with a manual controller, one could refute that through the physical interaction between the body and a console controller (or keyboard and mouse) results in a unification of the physical and virtual bodies. In such conditions, “the experience of one’s body proper is thus given through the same material as is one’s experience of motility: namely, traces of body movement captured at or above a minimally sufficient temporal speed” (p. 49). Whether hand or body, there is a connection between the user’s manual dexterity, the body’s physical mediation, and the movement on the screen. Following this argument, there is little separation between the body-schema and body-image as mediated through the technology and the visual images on the screen. In this manner, instead of viewing the body and digital space as separate entities, the body becomes a larger part of the process of digitally mediated interactions that potentially leads to a deeper understanding of our bodies in both its physical and perceptual sense.

### **1.4.1 Cybernetic Loops**

In her book *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, Hayles (1999) discusses that the relationship between humans and technology is a complex cybernetic system where “there are no essential differences or

absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals” (p. 3). To explain this, Hayles iterates four assumptions that characterize the posthuman perspective: first it “privileges information pattern over material instantiation, so that embodiment in a biological substrate is seen as an accident of history”, secondly it “considers consciousness ... as an epiphenomenon, as an evolutionary upstart trying to claim that it is the whole when in actuality it is only a minor sideshow”; thirdly it “thinks of the body as the original prostheses we all learn to manipulate, so that extending or replacing the body with other prostheses becomes a continuation of a process that began before we were born”, and finally – and according to Hayles, most importantly, “by these and other means, the posthuman view configures human being so that it can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines” (p. 3).

This is not to say that Hayles advocates for a form of cyborg being created through the melding of human and technology. Rather, her goal is to “...put back into the picture the flesh that continues to be erased in contemporary discussions about cybernetic subjects” (p. 5), essentially reconnecting the body to the cybernetic loop of mediated information. For Hayles, posthuman interaction with technology goes beyond simple ‘interaction’ as an exchange between either side, and moves toward integration of action within a larger cybernetic process that involves “three powerful actors – information, control, and communication ... operating jointly to bring about an unprecedented synthesis of the organic and the mechanical” (p. 8). Through these three actors, the human body becomes part of the informational feedback loop within the cybernetic process. By adding reflexivity



to the feedback loop, it becomes part of the system it created, resulting in an ever-changing, open feedback loop. This type of system is open to external sources of change, which then become part of the system it changed.

In talking about virtuality specifically, defining virtuality as “the cultural perception that material objects are interpenetrated by information patterns” (p. 13-14), Hayles aims to contest this separation between materiality and information, re-placing it on the same plane within the cybernetic process. By doing so, it is possible to describe how concepts and theories evolve through the attribution of materiality to information. As Hayles explains, “conceptual fields evolve similarly to material culture, in part because concept and artifact engage each other in continuous feedback loops” (p. 15). As this process continues, bits are added, while others are dropped to continue the forward movement of relative information.

Moving towards more explicit human-computer interactions, and concepts of virtuality and virtual bodies, Hayles approaches the notion of absence and presence and countering it with theories of pattern and randomness as the physical body becomes more integrated in to digital technologies. To clarify, in explicating the ways in which perception and understanding occur through touch and vision within the digitally mediated experience with text on a screen as opposed to understanding through traditional physically mediated touch and sensation (similar to what Hansen discussed in his text *Bodies in Code* described above), Hayles clarifies that “interacting with electronic images rather than with a materially resistant text, I absorb through my fingers as well as my mind a model of signification in which no simple one-to-one correspondence exists between signified and signifier” (p. 26). Knowledge is developed through perception and conceptual

manipulation, allowing interactions to occur that would otherwise be impossible in a purely physical world of interaction. Hayles articulates this idea through discussing the move towards virtual reality environments that enable the individual to don sensory equipment that “puts the user’s sensory system in a direct feedback loop with a computer” (p. 26). This is done by transforming the physical body into an ‘avatar’ on the screen through which the user is able to abstractly manipulate non-material objects within virtual space. In such cases, the user learns that boundaries are defined “less by the skin than by the feedback loop connecting the body and simulation in a technobio-integrated circuit” (p. 27). This is akin to Hansen’s work on understanding the body-schema through the networked body-image.

Again, we can see the potentiality for extrapolation towards less full-bodied forms of immersion. In this case, the concept of absence and presence (of body) becomes less important since the “avatar both is and is not present, just as the user both is and is not inside the screen” (p.27), instead, the interactions can be seen as forms of ‘pattern and randomness’ through understanding “what transformations govern the connections between user and avatar; what parameters can the user discover through interaction with the system; where do these patterns fade into randomness” (p. 27), etc. In thinking about our physical interactions with virtual spaces in this way, we can begin to associate the materiality of the body with the virtuality of the digital space, pushing us to consider the actions as being “warranted by the body, rather than contained within it” (p. 27) changes the way we perceive embodiment within the cybernetic feedback loop.

While it is beyond the scope and purpose of this dissertation to delve further into the concept of posthumanism and the cybernetic feedback loop as it pertains specifically to virtual reality and online participation, when thinking about the networked process of videogame play, it is important to acknowledge that the cybernetic system includes both physical materiality and information in equal terms. Acknowledging all parts of the system is imperative to understanding how the system works.

### **1.4.2 Actor Network Theory**

Within the Actor Network Theory (ANT), Latour (1987; 2005) proposes to “follow the actors” within a system instead of following the systems themselves. The goal of ANT is to “redefine the social” (2005, p. 2) by observing the associations between actors that Latour claims are all non-social by default. It is only in their associations do they become social. This is in response to streams in sociology which believe that the “social” is always already there (and predominantly human-centric); it is the ties that bind people together into the larger collective known as ‘society’. All actors within ANT share equal agency in their potential to construct the social, including non-human actors. “instead of taking a reasonable position and imposing some order beforehand, ANT claims to be able to find order much better *after* having left the actors deploy the full range of controversies in which they are immersed ... the task of defining and ordering the social should be left to the actors themselves, not taken up by the analyst” (p. 23)

While when talking about the social, one of the most common categories that arise is that of the ‘social’ group. This is traditionally, sociologically speaking, an association of individuals or agents that share some common denominator that ties them together to be

considered a ‘group’. In ANT, there is “no group, only group formation”. As he clarifies ANT’s position, “the first source of uncertainty one should learn from is that there is no relevant group that can be said to make up social aggregates, no established component that can be used as an incontrovertible starting point” (p. 29). This breaks down traditional sociological boundaries that define structure and association within societies. Within the ANT theory, the goal here is to break down pre-existing languages that define the social before understanding it – by categorizing the unknown into boxes to be analysed under the auspice of a particular definition, without giving voice to that which has been (pre)categorized. Instead of using a meta-language to categorize and classify the actions of the ‘actors’, “ANT prefers to use what could be called an *infra-language*, which remains strictly meaningless except for allowing displacement from one frame of reference to the next”. By doing this, the voices of the ‘actors’ are privileged over that of the analyst.

For Latour, we can only understand the formations of groups through the traces that are left behind by the actors. As he iterates, “ANT doesn’t claim that we will ever know if society is ‘really’ made of small individual calculative agents or of huge macro-agents ... on the contrary, it draws the relativist, that is, the scientific conclusion that those controversies provide the analyst with an essential resource to render the social connections traceable” (p. 30). For ANT, there is no need for meta-categories defining groups, because “neither society nor the social exists in the first place. They have to be retraced by subtle changes in connecting non-social resources” (p. 36). Following this line of thinking, change occurs only through the observation of what was – essentially, change is only seen through that which has already happened, letting the change be defined by the voices of the actors

through the traces left behind – an archaeology of the social of sorts. If the social refers to “that which has already been assembled and acts as a whole” (p. 43), then the goal of ANT is to determine the bits and pieces that are assembled – referred to as ‘assemblages’ create the social in any given moment of association.

Action is reconceptualised within ANT; “action is not done under the full control of consciousness; action should rather be felt as a node, a knot, and a conglomerate of many surprising sets of agencies that have to be slowly disentangled” (p. 44). That being said, there is a danger in believing that action has been ‘overtaken’ by agencies larger than the individual actors involved. This type of conflation runs the risk of affiliating ‘the social’ to things like “ ‘society’, ‘culture’, ‘structure’, ‘fields’, ‘individuals’, or whatever name they are given – that would *itself* be social. *Action should remain a surprise, a mediation, an event* [emphasis added]” (p. 45) . From this perspective, action is not something that an agent ‘does’ it is what happens between agents. It is, as Latour clarifies, “not the source of an action, but the moving target of a vast array of entities swarming toward it” (p. 46).

While most theories of social interaction deal predominantly with human actors, ANT follows the notion that objects have agency too. While other social theories also believe that objects influence social structures (MacCarthy, 1984), none give non-human actors as much agency within the social process as ANT. In establishing the difference between ‘social’ as in social ties, and ‘social’ as associations – where in the former, social often designates a type of link, whereas the social for ANT “is the name of a type of momentary association which is characterized by the way it gathers into new shapes” (2005, p. 65).

ANT affords objects agency by removing the definition of action as that which is intentional and meaningful. By this definition, it is understandable why agency remained grounded in the human. But by removing the necessity of intentionality and meaningful actions, objects – which designate action in their own right – are removed from their ‘material’ ‘causal’ positions. In order to determine whether or not an object is an agent, the question posits “does it make a difference in the course of some other agent’s action or not? Is there some trial that allows someone to detect this difference?” (p. 71). This is not to say that objects “cause” the actions they are involved in, but rather that their association within ‘social’ action gives it agency within the process.

While one could go on at great lengths to expand on the details that make up Actor-Network-Theory, the brief outline above demonstrated how groups, action, and actors are reconceptualised to redefine what is understood by social. Through assemblages, traces, and fleeting moments of action, the social can be understood to be something that is intangible, fluid, and constantly moving. By opening the scope of (inter)action to include non-human agents as equal contributors, ANT is an important conceptual contribution to the following research in understanding hybrid-identity and the *player/avatar* relationship as it exists within digitally mediated environments.

## 1.5 Conclusion

In order to move forward, it is important to differentiate between process, loop, and networks. Generally speaking, *process* infers a step by step method that can be followed to create or accomplish something. In the case of videogame play, a process can be understood as a series of actions (including the navigation of the player-character and the

pushing of the ascribed buttons) that leads to the completion of a task. *Loop* (in the cybernetic sense) infers a circular route of action (or cyclical) – there is an inherent direction to the flow of information. During videogame play, a cybernetic loop would include user input, internal computation by the mediating technology, the in-game action that in-turn creates a re-action where the results are exported to the player. This is a cyclical ‘process’ that continues in a loop for the duration of gameplay. A *network* is a lot more complex and messier than both a process and loop as it includes all the actions (and actors) within the entire system that makes up videogame play. Processes and loops occur within (and with) the network during gameplay. However, there is no inherent sense of direction of the interactions of elements within the network. This will become more evident throughout the course of this dissertation.

The following chapter aimed to briefly introduce the key concepts of identity, identification, representation and meaning, and technologically networked systems and set them within a historical and contextual frame to clarify the theoretical lenses that have informed the research questions and directions that make up the forthcoming dissertation. While seemingly different in terms of perspectives and disciplines, by drawing on several fields of study, it will be possible to address the complex nature of identity in single-player videogames.

From the process of identity construction and the manner in which identification occurs, to the ways in which cybernetic loops are manifested and networks are assembled, the following chapter also demonstrated that identity construction is a multi-faceted system that includes a range of interdependent variables. The focus on process will be carried over

into the next chapter, to discuss the framework that will be used as an analytical tool throughout the gameplay analysis portion of this thesis.



## Chapter 2: Videogame Identities & Framework

Videogame play is made up of a system of networked (inter)actions that occur in the game space between the player and the technology that mediates the in-game action. Different configurations of networked actions in videogame play, including the specific elements within play contexts and game genres, have the potential to lead to different forms of identity that involve both the player and the avatar or player-character.

While a lot of the research focusing on identity and videogame play refers to either the identity of the player or the identity development of the avatar in the game, this dissertation will discuss the relationship *between* the player and the avatar as it is mediated by the specificities of the game space and the technologies that facilitate gameplay. In doing so, it will be illustrated that an entity that can exist within the tensions and interactions between the player and the avatar – a sort of ‘hybrid’ identity that is not grounded in the player or the avatar, but that is mediated by the actions (and interactions) that occur between them. This is not to say that all player/avatar interactions within all videogame play contexts lead to the emergence of what will herein be termed ‘hybrid-identity’, or that other forms of identity are not created (and present) simultaneously, but that under certain conditions, it has the potential to transpire through the process of videogame play.

In order to be able to demarcate which gameplay contexts have the potential to produce hybrid-identity and to what extent, it is essential to deconstruct the networked interactions that occur within gameplay between the play context, the player, the technology that mediates the game, and the game world and its mechanics. By doing so, it

will be possible trace the unique system of actions that create the necessary tensions between player and avatar which enable the development of hybrid-identity. This chapter will be divided into four sections. The first section will outline the range of terminology currently being presented in game studies that work towards defining what has been traditionally been termed the ‘avatar’ with more specificity. The second section will briefly discuss the different types of identity that are facilitated through videogame play. The third section will introduce the individual elements that make up a framework that has been developed through my previous research to be used as an analytical tool to examine gameplay. Finally, the fourth section will briefly discuss the methodological application of the framework.

## **2.1 Terminology: Representations & Positions**

The two terms most commonly used when referring to the image on the screen controlled by the player are ‘avatar’ and ‘player-character’. Although sometimes used interchangeably (Bayliss, 2007), there are intrinsic characteristics within each and external factors that demarcate their differences. As such, these distinctions should be considered when choosing which term best represents the context they are being used in. As research on the relationship between the player and videogame play has progressed, new terms have been introduced in an attempt to represent the different contexts they exist in and functions they perform.

Although the term ‘avatar’ is often redefined to reflect the specific context of its use, it is employed to talk about a wide range of topics which can, at times, appear convoluted. For example, it is used in the context of a vessel that can be transformed

through gameplay of in videogames on a general level (Barr, Biddle & Brown, 2006), it is used as a vehicle for psychopsychological responses during videogame play (Lim & Reeves, 2009), or to talk about issues of gender, representation and gaming (Kafai, Heeter, Denner, & Sun, 2008). Based on these examples alone, it is clear to see that the term avatar, while sharing a base definition, is defined by more than just its form.

Generally speaking scholars mean several different, albeit connected things when they talk about or use the term ‘avatar’ within the context of videogame play. At the most basic level, scholars use the term when referring to the visual representation within a gameworld that the player controls to actualize gameplay. Within this overarching meaning, and always within the context of facilitating within the gameworld, an avatar can be perceived as an instrumental tool (Linderoth, 2005), or as a navigational vehicle (Carr, 2002) for the player.

### **2.1.1 Avatar & Player-character**

The term avatar has been given a lot academic attention as it has become a central focal point in videogame and internet research when discussing the visual image that represents the player online or in a game. Both Klevjer (2006) and Cleland’s (2008) doctoral dissertations aimed to define and delimit the boundaries of the avatar within both of these spaces. Generally speaking, the word avatar derives from Hinduism and means the bodily incarnation of a deity on earth, and more specifically it means ‘appearance’ or ‘manifestation’. The term has been appropriated to mean the visual representation of the user or player in a digitally mediated space. This was often the case in videogame studies as

well, with early research giving little attention to defining the boundaries and functions of the avatar beyond being the digital (or virtual) stand-in for the player.

As videogame studies delved deeper into discussing different types of games and the different roles the ‘avatar’ fulfilled, the term shifted from meaning a general visual representation to a more specific player-created entity. In order for the representation to be considered an avatar, the player must have some creative control in its creation (Waggoner, 2009, p. 9). As such, avatars are found largely in videogames that offer the player the opportunity to create their avatar, usually from a selection of predetermined features and characteristics, predominantly RPG’s and MMOG’s as well as virtual worlds like *Second Life*.

This is in contrast to what is often referred to as a player-character, which is typically a pre-created, scripted character that the player controls within the structured confines of a videogame narrative. The player often has limited ability to alter the player-character beyond the basic armour, weapon, and skill upgrades that are necessary to develop in order to successfully complete the game’s challenges, if at all. Player-characters are most commonly found in single-player games, however there are some single-player games that offer the player broader range of customization than other genres even though they are scripted characters such as adventure and role-playing games.

Waggoner (2009), focusing briefly on context of use in regards to delineating the difference between avatars and player-characters, in his book *My Avatar, My Self: Identity in Video Role-Playing Games*, claims that the difference is dependent on level of creative choice (p. 9). In trying to find a balance between a fully player-created ‘avatar’ and the

more scripted ‘player-character’ commonly seen in single-player role-playing games, Waggoner opts for the term ‘agents’ which he defines through the work of Athomas Goldberg as being “any semiautonomous pieces of software that assume some visual embodiment” (1997; p. 161). Admittedly vague and potentially problematic, this definition of ‘agent’ is at the foundation of the definition of ‘player-character’, as a pre-created character which requires the player’s control. But determining the appropriate term depends on more than just how much creative control the player has.

### **2.1.2 Capacity/Appearance**

Tronstad defines the avatar through their functions within the game and not necessarily the level of player creative control in her chapter “Character Identification in World of Warcraft: The Relationship between Capacity and Appearance” (2008). For her, the term ‘avatar’ should be reserved for:

player-character relationships in which the character functions as a representation of the player in the game – in other words, for relationships where the character (avatar) has no perceptible identity of its own. To describe the player-character relationship of a player who roams WoW as herself, not role-playing and with no consciousness as to the character (avatar) being separate from herself” (p. 258).

Whereas the term ‘character’ “... is our representation in the game when it takes on an identity separate from our own, in the sense that we can clearly identify the character separate from ourselves” (p. 259).

The ‘avatar’ and ‘player-character’ can exist within the same visual representation through what Tronstad defines as the character’s ‘capacity’ and their ‘appearance’ at any given moment during gameplay. In this context, capacity is the “sum of capabilities available for the character” and ‘appearance’ is the “representational qualities” (p. 249). The character has inherent capabilities built into them such as how many hit points they may have, or what fighting styles they have the capacity to acquire during gameplay. Capacity in this manner can be seen as the character’s fixed potentiality. Whereas appearance is the representational qualities of the character which are often determined by the player through the available choices in the game. For Tronstad, this goes beyond the physical appearance and includes perception as well. As she iterates “appearance cannot be reduced to physical appearance, but must include all kinds of symbolic labels attached to the character, such as name, gender, level, and guild affiliation, to mention a few” (p. 250). Appearance is not static, but is “fundamentally connected to performance, which in turn is partly determined by capacity” (p. 250).

While Tronstad is speaking specifically of a character within a multi-player game setting where appearances are socially and culturally perceived, it is possible to extrapolate the core idea of a visual representation fulfilling both ‘avatar’ and ‘player-character’ roles based on the idea of capacity and appearance.

### **2.1.3 Locus of Manipulation & Altered Positions**

In his article “Beings in the Game-world: Characters, avatars, and players” (2007), Baylis focuses on the ‘point of control’ of the player through the term ‘locus of manipulation’ which he uses to “describe the in-game position of the player’s ability to

assert control over the game-world” (p. 1). This term is used over avatar or player-character because each carry different meanings and refer to different positions within the game space. While he is referring to the ways in which these positions facilitate embodiment, the following section aims to illuminate a perspective that looks to highlight the type of gameplay the player-character and avatar affords.

Bayliss describes the character as existing in a “world where meaning is always-already present” (p. 2). The capacity of the character exists only within the confines of the game design, and largely outside of the player’s control. The gameworld is often structured around the limited actions of the character as well. In this case, the player’s ‘locus of manipulation’ is a relatively guided entity that is designed to behave in a way that is “consistent with the environment in which they operate” (p. 2). Simply stated the “character is an entity in its own right, rather than a simple conduit for direct action by the player” (p. 2). As such, the character as locus of manipulation limits the player’s control in their interactions within the gameworld to keep them consistent with what the game wants the player to do. The player plays ‘as’ the character in the gameworld.

This is in contrast to the avatar which “operates as a tool that extends the player’s ability to realise affordances within the gameworld” (p. 2) and follows Newman’s notion of avatar as vehicle for the player (2002). Avatars exist in gameworlds that are more open in regards to their capacity. In this case, the locus of manipulation embodies the actions of the player, and not of a pre-set character. The player plays ‘through’ the avatar.

Finally, Bayliss offers the position of playing ‘with’ the locus of manipulation in situations where the player uses “the locus of manipulation as an explicit point of access to

play with the world and rules of the videogame in a more freeform manner” (p. 4). This is the broadest of the positions, and is found most often in open-ended games which allow the player to interact with the game around a loosely structured narrative as is often seen in MMOG’s and adventure games.

While Waggoner and Bayliss focus on the concept of control in defining the player-character and the avatar, the difference lies in what type of control they are focusing on. Instead of creative control, Bayliss differentiates the terms based on the level of control the player has in regards to the affordances of the gameworld.

Gazzard takes a different approach in defining the avatar in her article “The Avatar and The Player: Understanding the relationship beyond the screen” (2009). In lieu of focusing on forms of control, she addresses the term avatar in regards to player interaction and viewpoints, or ‘altered positions’. For her, the avatar is “more than what is shown in the gameworld” (p. 191) and consists of four primary characteristics:

1. Locus – it’s the place in its world and how that is communicated to the user/player.
  2. Agency – the ability to effect an action in its world.
  3. Empathy – how much the player/user relates to and/or cares about what they are affecting in the world.
  4. Player Character – who am I in the world? What can I do? What do I represent?
- (p. 191)

She continues on to say that while not all avatars will have the same level of each characteristics, all avatars have some level of each. Fundamentally, “there will always be an



‘avatarial’ presence in whilst experiences interactive immersive environments” (p. 192) even if there is not a visually represented avatar. This ‘presence’ is communicated through difference ‘altered positions’ which helps understand how players “experience the avatar in the virtual world, rather than the screen we are seeing them through” (p. 192).

The four positions (locus, agency, empathy and player-character) are determined by the extent to which the avatar is displayed on the screen. For Gazzard “Understanding the avatar as a combination of both presence and display (even in a limited form) shows how users are still able to relate to and empathise with onscreen scenarios to aid their learning and development” (p. 193). The avatar, then, is both a visual and perceptual frame for the player and not a vehicle defined through levels (and types) of control.

These types of blurring of the definitional lines between ‘avatar’ and ‘player-character’ (Bayliss, 2007; Gazzard, 2009; Tronstad, 2008; Waggoner, 2009) obfuscates a clear and decisive definition of either term, re-establishing the importance in considering gameplay context when employing either terms. Importantly, Tronstad (2008) posits that form and function (appearance and capacity) are not mutually exclusive and can exist within the same playable character. From this perspective it could be said that a playable character alters between being an ‘avatar’ and a ‘player-character’ during the process of gameplay. When gameplay is focused on aspects of appearance, it could be argued that the playable-character is in its ‘avatar’ state. Whereas when gameplay is focused on the playable character’s capacity (game-centric elements that determine its characteristics), it is in its player-character state.

## **2.2 Identity & Videogames**

Whether focused on the identity of the player, of the avatar/player-character or somewhere in between, videogame play has the potential to facilitate the emergence and development of a wide range of identities. Understanding that different games and contexts promote diverse identities, the following section aims to focus on four specific types that will be addressed in a range of capacities throughout the coming chapters.

### **2.2.1 Discovered Identity**

Like a teenager discovering their identity through experimentation and introspection, through the trial and error of videogame play, the player discovers the identity of the player-character. In narratively scripted videogames, the player embarks on a journey to uncover the plot through gameplay actions, and discover the capacities and attributes that make up the identity of the player-character.

Through the cumulative interactions that occur between the player and social game-world over long periods of time, the MMOG avatar (or player-character) has the opportunity to develop an identity that is more than the sum of the player's actions confined within the game's designed structure (Boudreau, 2007; Chee, Vieta, & Smith, 2006; Taylor, 2002; Waggoner, 2009). In such cases, the player not only creates the identity of the avatar through the selection of class, race, gender and physical attributes, but the avatar's identity is revealed to the player through gameplay and social interactions that are unique to MMOG's. From this perspective, the player actively discovers the avatar's identity even though they actively created the character in the beginning through the process of gameplay.

Similarly, Tronstad (2008) discusses the idea of an ebb and flow that occurs between identity construction as a conscious creation by the player and as a process of discovery that occurs through gameplay. Focusing on the development of character identity in the context of the MMOG *World of Warcraft*, Tronstad iterates that “... as with our own identity development the development of a character identity also involves an element of discovery. It is not unusual that (more or less surprising) aspects of the character’s personality will be discovered during play, aspects that were not deliberately constructed from the start” (p. 257). Although Tronstad is referring specifically to the development of the character’s identity in this quote, it is clear that the discovery of identity occurs on the level of the player – insinuating that the character has an imbedded identity outside of the player’s creation.

As the process of gameplay exists within a videogame ‘system’ consisting of the player and their actions, the technical artefacts that facilitate gameplay, and the game’s environment (as will be detailed later in this chapter), it is difficult to view the development of the player-character’s identity as an isolated event that occurs explicitly within the boundaries of the player-character. This ‘creation/discovery’ model of character identity development can be viewed as something that transpires explicitly through the active process of gameplay

### **2.2.2 Projective Identity**

The notion of creation is taken a step further in what is often called ‘projective identity’ (Gee, 2003). In his book *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, Gee defines projective identity in the context of videogame play as when

players ‘project’ their “... values and desires onto the virtual character” (p. 55). For Gee, projective identity occurs when the player sees “... the virtual character as one's own project in the making” which is defined by the player’s “... aspirations for what [they] want the character to be and become” (p. 55). While Gee is referring specifically to his relationship with his avatar ‘Bead Bead’, the idea that players often impose their desires and aspirations on to the creation and development of the player-character is one of the most common ways a player interacts with their virtual characters.

Indeed, projective identity, whether formally labelled as such or not, is one of the most discussed form of identity within digital culture studies. Digital spaces such as virtual worlds and videogames offer the player a space of exploration and negotiation of situations that they might otherwise not be able to encounter in their everyday lives. Much research has been done about the use of avatars in digital environments as an expressive extension of self (Cleland, 2008; Duchenault, Wen, Yee & Wadley, 2009; Marty & Consalvo, 2010; Meadows, 2008; Turkle, 1997). From altering one’s gender (either by choice or design), to being in charge of an entire platoon, players are able to perform actions and have experiences they might not otherwise be able (or even want) to in their everyday lives .

Projective identity allows the player to feel attached to the character they are playing – navigating – through the game’s environment. By projecting their values and aspirations on to the player-character, players can feel that they have a hand in the development of the character, creating a sense of responsibility – perhaps even accountability – for the actions their avatar performs. In this manner, it could be argued that projective identity is tightly linked with the process of identification a player goes through

to understand the content and context of any particular videogame. By being in control of the character's identity in a way that is inextricably linked with the player's own identity, then it is possible that the player would feel more invested in the gameplay.

As will be demonstrated in the upcoming chapters, players have less control over the projective identity of their character in the context of single-player videogames, which boast more structured narratives and defined characters. The scope of player controlled creative and projective identity potential depends largely on the context and genre of the game. For example, in single-player role-playing games, players are often in control of creating their character from a pre-designed selection, and must make gameplay choices throughout the game that shape the personality and ultimately, the identity of the character. In games such as many first-person shooters (FPS), players enter the game world via a predetermined character whose narrative and identity have already been scripted. While there are small things that a player can do to alter that character's identity, such as playing or navigating the game in a manner that it was not intended by the game designers, or develop skills and accumulate armour that could help define the type of character they are (frugal; risky; etc.), the player-character is often quite set in its scripted identity.

### **2.2.3 Liminal Identity**

Following the definition found in the Oxford English Dictionary, *liminal* (*adj.*) is: "Of or pertaining to the threshold or initial stage of a process". While the concept is said to have derived from psychology as early as 1884, the term is most commonly attributed to the field of anthropology through the works of ethnographer Arnold Van Gennep in his book, *Les rites de passage* (1909/1981), where Van Gennep defined the three stages of

ritual as being separation, the liminal stage or threshold, and re-assimilation. It is in the stage between what one was and what one becomes through the process of ritual is the state of liminality. As Turner (1969/1995) clarifies in his book *The Ritual Process: structure and anti-structure*, “Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. (p. 95),

Within the context of virtual reality, liminality refers to the space between the physical user and the disembodied space of virtuality. Digital spaces are a perfect example of liminality in that there is never any materialization between body, action and virtual space – there is no end; just the infinite process of interaction between spaces. Quite aptly stated in her summary of the concept and history of liminality, Alison Wright contextualizes the virtual as “... a liminal space that consists only of its becomingness-state, and not an actual being or object to become” (Wright, ¶ 4). Donna Haraway iterates in her essay “A Cyborg Manifesto”, in regards to the complexity of the cyborg which is “a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (p. 149), liminality lies within the “image of both imagination and material reality” (p. 151). Therefore, the cyborg body exists in both and neither at the same time, since it is in a constant state of process within the cybernetic organism that enables its existence. Kathy Cleland (2008) writes about the unsettling relationship a user has with their avatar in the context of it being a virtual representation of self, “these mediated images of the self occupy an uncanny liminal zone between self and other, living and non-living, human and non-human, real and virtual” (p. 4).

In the context of videogames, liminality can be seen as the space (or moments) between the player and the player-character; or simply, the time relayed between action and re-action during gameplay (Waggoner, 2009). As the player is in a constant cycle of networked actions, they repeatedly cross the threshold of embodiment between their physical bodies and the virtual body of the in-game avatar. Each time a player performs a physical action outside of the game, they must pass through this liminal space as their actions materialize within the game world via the virtual body of the player-character. Liminal identity, therefore, is the transitional space between the player between player and player-character (and back again). Liminal identity is always necessarily unstable as the nature of liminality infers movement – the transition between two nodes within a network, or between two states of being. This type of identity will not be explicitly discussed within this dissertation but it is necessary to acknowledge its existence as liminality is inherently part of the networked gameplay process.

#### **2.2.4 Hybrid-Identity**

Defined at its most basic level, hybrid-identity is an identity between the played avatar (or player-character) and the player but that does not originate from or reside in either. It exists in a form that is sometimes (but not always) acknowledged by the player. When recognized by the player, it is often a sense that there is something more between themselves and the player-character than its role as a vehicle for their gameplay choices and more than the sum of its affordances designed into the game. It can emerge in moments of gameplay and reflection where the player acts outside of the prescribed actions.

Throughout the course of gameplay, hybrid-identity may emerge as a completely separate, albeit often abstract, entity that exists between the player and the player-character that can only develop through the networked process of videogame play. Although it is developed through an amalgamation of interactions within the process of gameplay between the player, the in-game avatar, the game environment (mechanics, physics, etc), and the technology (computer, console, etc) that mediates the actions, hybrid-identity is not the end result of gameplay interactions, nor does it necessarily always emerge in all play contexts. While it often remains intangible, its presence is still felt and is an active element within the network.

Originally discovered through my research on the *player/avatar* relationship in MMOG's, with a specific focus on Sony's *EverQuest* (1999) (Boudreau, 2007), the notion of hybrid-identity was related to the "interconnected networks of meaning within the self that interact with elements external to the individual" (p. 85). Within the broader context of videogame play, the notion of 'self' is complicated by the role of the avatar (or player-character) which holds a position of both subject and object for the player (D'Aloia, 2009; Martin, 2012). The avatar performs a dualistic role of being the virtual body of the player within the gameworld while simultaneously existing wholly external to the physical body of the player. In this way, the avatar is both part of the player and a completely separate entity in its own right. This conflict between the self/otherness of the avatar is often at the heart of understanding identity in avatar-based videogames.

Historically, the term identity has focused on the individual and their relation to the external world as was demonstrated in chapter one. In contrast, the concept of hybrid-



identity does not reside in either the player or the avatar, but rather is a fluid, sometimes fleeting form of being that exists somewhere between the player and the avatar (or player character) during the process of videogame play. It is an identity that is not necessarily attached to anything tangible or that can always be decisively pointed to and identified. There is an inherent abstractness to hybrid-identity as it is not grounded in the player or the player/avatar-self/other paradigm. Through the networked process of play, there develops a third, body-less identity that has the potential to emerge if the conditions are right.

It could be argued that the opportunities for hybrid-identity to occur is greatest within the context of the social gameplay commonly found in MMOG's. In MMOG's, the player-character develops not only within the confines and structure of the game, but also within the socially constructed narrative that develops through prolonged gameplay and community development (Boudreau, p. 66). Other players can contribute to the hybrid-identity of any given player-character through their shared imagination and memory of played events that occur within the gameworld. For example, the recounting and archiving of epic battles on third-party websites by other players work to concretize hybrid-identity outside of played instances. Through the collective memory of the player community, the player-character expands beyond the player's actions and game's design, further contributing to hybrid-identity. Without the social component, hybrid-identity may be less prominent in single-player gameplay as there are less contributing factors that work to identify and stabilize it over time.

Also, in MMOG's hybrid-identity can be recognized by other players, even if the player who is part of the play-process is not aware or does not see it. If I perceived Velixious merely as an extension of myself, it does not mean that hybrid-identity doesn't exist. Since it is not grounded in the player, its existence does not depend on the belief or acknowledgment of the player. In an MMOG community, other players can see this hybrid-identity in a number of ways that does not directly (or necessarily) involve the player proper. For example, the ways in which the player community sees the role of Velixious is fundamentally outside of myself as a player. Her identity exists outside of mine in that she is a Barbarian Shaman. But it also exists outside of her designed characteristics as well. Velixious was known as a good healer within the server community even though healing was a secondary designed characteristic to the Shaman class. People did not say "Kelly is good at healing in-game avatars/characters with Velixious". No matter who logged into my account and controlled her, the player community expected her to perform in a certain way. But hybrid-identity is also more than Velixious' identity as a played-character within (and outside of) the game-space. It develops from within the entire networked process of play and while it includes the played identity of the player-character.

In the broader context of videogame play in general, what differentiates hybrid-identity from discovered and projective identity is that it does not belong to, or reside in the player or the avatar/player-character explicitly. Unlike liminal identity, hybrid-identity exists within the process of gameplay rather than in the spaces between the interactions. As such, each gameplay session offers the potential for different hybrid-identities to emerge based not only on internal factors (game environment), but also on external factors such as

increased player skill, play context (social or singular, private or public, online or offline), and game genre. Finally, hybrid-identity may occur simultaneously and embody elements of other forms of digitally mediated identity. Theoretically, hybrid-identity has the potential to develop into an additional networked element within the process of videogame play independent of the player and the player-character to be considered in the same regard as player and player-character identity.

It should be noted that the conditions are not always present for hybrid-identity to even occur at all during gameplay. Part of the goal of this dissertation is to delineate what the networked process of play entails by breaking it down to see its individual elements through employing the analytical framework to be described in the following section. While the elements alone do not tell us anything on their own, by acknowledging (or defining) their role within the networked process of videogame play, it will be possible to see how the individual elements contribute (or inhibit) the potential for hybrid-identity to occur within the played context of a videogame. It will also work towards further defining the characteristics of hybrid-identity.

## 2.3 Foundational Framework

In order to identify the conditions necessary for hybrid-identity to occur, a framework was developed through the social gameplay experience found in MMOG's. While the primary focus was on the *player/avatar* relationship, each relationship is equally important to both the gameplay process and the emergence of hybrid-identity. The primary framework consists of five primary relationships that exist in varying degrees during gameplay. They are:

- *player/avatar*
- *avatar/avatar*
- *player/game environment*
- *avatar/game environment*
- *player/player*

Although these relationships appear straightforward on the surface, they envelop a complex series of interactions that occur both within the player as well as within the game environment simultaneously through player decisions and actions coupled with design choices and the technical capacity of the game mechanics. In many cases, each of these elements were determined in some manner by the sociality essential to MMOG gameplay based primarily on ‘social’ interactions with other players, role fulfilment determined by social factors (Boudreau, 2005), and social interactions with the game environment (through interactions with non-playing-characters), and the game world. Yet they are not unique to MMOG gameplay.

The network of actions are interdependent, relying on each other for the overall gameplay experience. The following section will define and contextualize each networked relationship by considering the discreet actions that occur within them and to consider their contribution towards the possible emergence of hybrid-identity. It should be noted that as the framework was developed through MMOG play, the term avatar is used in this chapter to reflect the in-game character that was created and developed by the player over time. However, as this dissertation addresses single-player gameplay, the term ‘avatar’ within the

applied framework will be replaced with ‘player-character’ to reflect the scripted nature of the main playable character in each game.

### 2.3.1 Player/Avatar

To elaborate, *the player/avatar* relationship is made up of interactions between the player and the in-game avatar (or player-character). Beginning with the *player/avatar* relationship as all player interactions with the game world occur through the in-game avatar. During active gameplay, the player performs a range of actions that alter the avatar. Depending on the genre (and each individual game title) the *player/avatar* relationship embodies interactions pertaining to character creation and development through gameplay actions such as exploration, questing, and combat.

Although avatars are sometimes deemed simply as a navigational tool for the player within the game world, as Newman (2002) states; “...the "character" is better considered as a suite of characteristics or equipment utilised and embodied by the controlling player” (¶ 3). This gives a limited view of the avatar, demoting it to a purely functional representation of the player within the game. Even though the player does indeed use and embody the ‘suite of characteristics’ that makes up the designed portion of the avatar (or character), it often also serves a deeper role, especially when considering the genre and context within which the avatar exists.

Indeed, many contemporary games have been increasingly incorporating moral or ethical choices embedded in the gameplay. For example, Ubisoft’s *Splinter Cell: Double Agent* (2006) puts the playable-character, Sam Fisher, in certain situations where the player has to make a moral or ethical choice. An example of such an encounter involves a man

hanging in a dungeon. As the camera pans (out of the player's control), the player can see that the man is in pain, and so the player must decide whether or not they should take time out to save him, and risk taking more time to accomplish the set task (and further risk getting caught). While there is no right or wrong decision within the structure of the gameplay, the choices made in these situations allows the player to reflect on either their own personal moral code, or perhaps the moral code the player has imagined for Sam Fisher, depending on the perspective of the player. These types of choices aid to develop the *player/avatar* relationship.

As previously mentioned, Tronstad (2008) dissects the relationship between the player and the player-character in a different manner, distinguishing the role of the player-character as a form of representation in what she calls 'appearance' from its role as a skill set and capabilities of the character in what she terms 'capacity'. It is the relationship between these two elements that "affect the possibility of identifying with the character during play" (p. 249).

For Tronstad, it is only through identifying with the avatar through the perfect balance of both appearance and capacity that a player can enter a cybernetic loop of gameplay which creates a state of 'flow' where both player and avatar meld together while simultaneously remaining two separate entities (p. 254). As the player identifies with the character, there is an inherent implication that the avatar is something that which is external to the self. This is contrasted to the idea that the avatar is a representation of the player extended into the game world. It is precisely within this state of separate togetherness that hybrid-identity has the potential to emerge.

As players work towards developing the player-character through a range of actions including victorious battles, completion of puzzles, or successful navigation through the game space, the player must constantly (re)identify with and (re)consider the ever-changing avatar. This is at the core of the process of identity construction of both the player, and the avatar. As the player is confronted with new information as a result of each of their in-game decisions performed through the actions of their on-screen avatar, the player must renegotiate their decisions in order to continue. Each one of these negotiations can be seen as potential moments of identity construction – even if a player fails to succeed any particular task in the game, failure is an equally potent element, as it forces the player to reconsider actions that they initially believed to be right. Through the course of gameplay, these are the moments that enable hybrid-identity, as each action within the game is navigated through the avatar, but is nonetheless controlled by the player.

The potential for hybrid-identity to transpire varies depending on the form and level of interaction the player has with the avatar. Identification must occur on multiple levels for gameplay to continue. If the player does not care about the avatar they are playing (even on a subconscious level) then the desire to move forward may be hindered. While this could be countered with the argument that a player may be driven solely by narrative curiosity, it is rare that this is the sole driving force behind gameplay in most contexts. It is through the dynamic interplay between the different types of *player/avatar* interactions that the necessary space and tensions are created, blurring the lines between player and avatar, where hybrid-identity can develop.

### 2.3.2 Player/Game Environment & Avatar/Game Environment

The *player/game environment* relationship is inextricably linked to the *avatar/game environment* relationship as all player interactions within the game space occur via the on-screen avatar. As the player develops a knowledge of the game world through their interactions with their avatar, they must learn the geography and physics of the game world through the virtual ‘body’ of their avatar. This relationship relies purely on the players audio/visual perceptions as opposed to their tactile perceptions even though the player can connect their physical manipulation of the game controller to visual movement on the screen, creating a reactionary loop of interaction. For example, if the player pushes the “Y” button, the avatar jumps on the screen. So while the player can relate a physical interaction to a virtual action, the player cannot learn the virtual world through tactile interaction with the objects within the game world. Therefore, the player finds alternative ways to learn the materiality and geography of the game environment, whether through visual means, or through learning new forms of abstract (or virtual) materiality by manipulating their avatar through the game world. This is important when considering the process of identity construction in videogame play, since the action on the screen can only occur through the physical manipulation of the controller, and a virtually shared experience between the player and the avatar within a game environment.

Individuals traditionally learn about object boundaries through physical touch. As one interacts with physical objects in their everyday lives, they learn to define space through object materiality and its relationship to the physical body (McCarthy, 1984). This material understanding is altered when a player enters a videogame. They are confronted



with a virtual body (the player-character) in an intangible space (the gameworld). While it is tempting for a player to adhere to their material spatial knowledge through their visual senses, players must learn to adapt to the virtual material conditions of the videogame space. This is a challenge as interactions occur simultaneously in two different spaces; the digital space of the game world and the physical space of the player. Players must also learn the relationship between their physical manipulation of the game controller and the virtual actions that it creates in the game world. They cannot simply rely on their natural physical sensory system to determine the avatar's limitations and boundaries by simply coming into 'contact' with other objects.

This is complicated by several factors such as coding errors that may be slightly erroneous. A box may look like a box in that it may appear as a solid, material entity, however it may not actually behave like a box if the avatar reaches out to touch it. Through coding errors, the avatar's hand may be able to pass through it unintentionally, which results in the player's redefined understanding of physicality in the constructed, digital space of the game-world.

Further complicating the understanding of space and materiality within the game are the ways in which a player navigates their avatar through virtual space is not necessarily directly linked to our previous physical understandings of movement. Movement within videogames occur through an understanding of how to use the game controller (or a keyboard's directional arrow keys in combination with a computer mouse if it is a computer game) and not in relation to how our physical body works. Through gameplay, players learn that player-character actions on the screen are created through repetitive controlled

movements performed through the pushing of buttons and rotating of joy-sticks. These controlled movements have little to do with understanding how to actually perform the actions represented on the screen. If the player wants to make their avatar jump, they need only to know what command is programmed in the game (via the controller) to do so; they do not need to know how to physically jump in their physical world.

At first glance, this disconnect from a player's physical existence may lead one to think that the cybernetic loop or 'symbiotic circuit' would be broken, resulting in an interference in the flow between the player and the game. While this may be the case for some, it also allows the player to explore movements that may not have any connection to the player's physical world, such as flying on a fantastical creature through the mountain, or leap great lengths between buildings. It is through these actions that are beyond the player's physical reality, which are inherently tied to the active suspension of disbelief discussed in chapter one, that the potential for identity construction can occur even if there is a physical lapse between the player and the action on the screen.

Finally, another element of gameplay that has potential to modulate a player's relation to the game world, as well as the avatar's, is through the use of various visual perspectives. In many game worlds, the player has the option to navigate their avatars using a variety of different visual perspectives. In a first person perspective, which is directly through the eyes of the avatar, the player does not see the avatar's body in their field of vision on the screen. In the third person perspective, the player has a slightly wider field of vision, which includes the upper body of the avatar (usually from behind) they are navigating through virtual space. In some games, and commonly seen in early MMOG's,

the player can set the point-of-view to a  $\frac{3}{4}$  aerial perspective that is panned out considerably from the avatar, usually from the a behind/side angle, giving the player a full view of the landscape that includes their avatar's entire body. Each of these perspectives offers different challenges to understanding spatiality within the game space, and in turn influences the ways in which a player identifies with the actions on the screen and with the avatar that they play.

These types of interactions between the player and the game environment, as well as the avatar and the game environment, add to the potential for hybrid-identity to occur as the player learns to understand the game world through a new set of perceptual tools. This has the potential to develop the relationship between the player and the avatar, as the player learns the avatar's world through the body of the avatar furthering the blended form of self between player and avatar.

### **2.3.3 Avatar/Avatar**

*Avatar/Avatar* interactions occur between the player-character and other avatars; either other player-characters or non-playing characters (NPC's) in the game environment. What is important to consider when thinking about *avatar/avatar* interactions is that while the player is essentially in control of the actions of their avatar (as described above in the *player/avatar* section), the on-screen avatar may perform actions that are out of control of the player. For example, when a player is interacting with a non-playing character, if their avatar is left to stand there (with no movement instigated by the player's interaction with the gaming device), the avatar may perform coded actions such as shifting from one foot to another, or perhaps mindlessly looking around their in-game environment (appearing to

‘wait’ for an action to be initiated). While the player is not in control of these actions, they still play a part in the process of identity construction, but instead of originating in the actions of the player, it originates in the programmed actions of the game. It is in these moments that players receive cues from the game-world that they can potentially internalize, and use to learn things about the avatar such as demeanour or coded personality.

Another example would be the use of the avatar in cut-scenes (in single or multi-player games) where the possibility of player controlled interaction is momentarily taken away from the player. In these instances, the player is removed from the action, forcing the player into a spectator role in the process. However, even though the player is disconnected from the action in a physical sense, it does not mean that the player is removed from the potential for identity work to occur. In the case of cut scenes and cinematics, the player is often given contextual narrative information regarding their avatar and possible foreshadowing of things to come in the game. This helps the player situate their future choices as gameplay proceeds. The *avatar/avatar* relationship is one that is negotiated purely within the game’s environment.

### **2.3.4 Player/Player**

The *player/player* relationship is one that does not exist in all forms of videogame play. Originally discussed within the context of MMOG’s which are fundamentally based on *player/player* interactions as the genre’s design obligates players to cooperate within the game’s environment in order to successfully navigate the game’s challenges. Without such interactions, players could not perform the majority of the tasks set out for the players.

From the accomplishing the elements of a quest successfully, to entering into combat in order to increase the level of the player's avatar, mass cooperation is integral to the genre's success.

Since MMOG's rely on inter-player communication often via voice or textual chat that create trust relationships for game progression, players must learn the social boundaries that influence interpersonal relations specific to the gaming context. This includes understanding the lore behind the game world, sharing social imaginaries surrounding the fiction of the game created by the community of the server as well as role expectations and performance within the game. There is a potential for various levels of identity construction to occur in these instances. Firstly, for the player, as the social and functional interactions between themselves and other players have many social benefits in the context of gameplay (Mortensen, 2006; Turkle, 1995). Secondly the player can develop the identity of their avatar not only through the game design, but also through the development of an avatar history (back-story) through combining both fan fiction, in game role-playing (for example performing deeds in the game that are not part of the design, such as performing random acts of kindness like helping a player succeed in battle without asking), or donating in-game money to a low-level character. This is similar to projective identity as described at the beginning of this chapter.

Although in order to play MMOG's, players interact via an internet connection, it is possible to play over the internet yet remain in a shared physical space (collocation). In such cases, players must each have their own computer and sustain an account with the game company. This type of *player/player* interaction is interesting in regards to identity

construction and the fluidity of a symbiotic circuit because players who play in physical proximity are often still playing with other people online simultaneously, therefore, the majority of the communication between the two players in the same room often occur through text mediated through the computer, even though they may be in the same room. This often fuses together the identities of the players with their avatars in ways that is not normally seen in MMOG play that occurs with only one player in the room, playing online with other players online.

However, MMOG's are not the only games that rely on *player/player* interactions. At its most basic, player / player interactions can also occur between friends playing a game in the same physical space. This could be a multi-player game, where both players are actively engaged in the same game at the same time. Actions that occur between players in shared physical space vary, and have differing impacts on both the gameplay and the potential for identity construction. Acts from friends jostling for position on a sofa; perhaps inadvertently forcing a player to push the wrong button at the wrong time, causing an ill-timed (and unintended) defeat within the game; to words of encouragement shared between friends, have the potential to alter the gaming experience for all those involved.

In multi-player gaming where the players share physical space, there are a lot of actions that occur outside of the game that impact the decisions made within the game space such as the physical horse-play described above. For some, the experience of playing a game in front of friends may be an intimidating one – causing the player to make mistakes or to perform on a higher level than normal. This type of contextual *player/player* interaction often has a heavy impact on the player in terms of the creation of social norms

and expectations among friends. This may lead to a player to make gameplay decisions they may not have otherwise made – such as playing on a harder level, or using the most impressive weapon over the most effective. For others, gameplay with friends in a shared physical space may have benefits to the player’s gameplay performance. This could occur through in-person discussions of the best tactics for the task at hand before starting the console, or having someone present who is more knowledgeable who can lead the way and steer other players away from danger. According to Vaida & Greenberg (2008) this is due to the “porous boundaries” that exist between the physical space of the players and the digital game space they are playing in. Whichever type of interaction occurs, there are plenty of opportunities both within the game space and within the shared physical space exterior to the game that enables identity construction to occur.

Playing side by side in physical and digital space becomes more complex than playing a single-player game, as players have to contend with both players’ physical and digital interactions that potentially affect the cybernetic loop explained earlier. Players have to be cognitively aware of their co-players within the game space especially when they share the display screen, as each player must separate their visual scope (in the case of split-screen gaming), or be consciously aware of where their partner is on the same screen while concentrating their performative actions. In the case of multi-player collocated gaming on a shared device, the cybernetic loop is expanded to include the second player, but the mediating device remains the same – simply processing two sets of actions.

Considering multi-player, collocated gameplay with two mediating devices, the players must negotiate both bodies in conjunction with the players they share the physical

and digital space with the same way as described above in multi-player collocated gameplay with a shared device. However, the cybernetic loop created is altered significantly, influencing the dynamic links between gameplay, device and player. Within this extended cybernetic model, each players' actions are fed into two separate devices (screens and consoles), essentially existing within their own loop. Player actions are then linked in the networked space between the consoles, which creates an extra level of interactivity within the multi-player experience. In such cases, players can experience a network divergence during gameplay (where the connected devices become unsynchronized, and there is no more communication between the players' actions, the individual devices, and the networked devices, often referred as lag).

This does not occur in multi-player collocated shared device gaming, since all player actions are mediated by the same device, therefore there is no chance for a slip in cybernetic communication (unless, of course, one player ceases to participate). Socially, in multi-player collated gameplay with separate devices, the player is also able to enter into a "private gaming sphere" (Szentgyotgyi et al., 2008), which has the potential to minimize the social interactions within the shared physical spaces as described above.

In all forms of multi-player gaming, players must be conscious of the presence and actions of other players in the game-space. In an MMOG such as *EverQuest* (Sony, 1999) or *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard, 2004), players are dependent on the skill set of other players. As such, there is a responsibility between players to perform their individual actions successfully, as failure may not only influence their own gameplay success, but also the gameplay success of other players. This is also true of co-operative multi-player games



as well. The players create a dependency on the choices and strategies of their partners. In competitive multi-player games, there is less of a dependency on the strategy of the other players, but the identity work that is often done surrounding the game become as important as their performance within the game space.

### **2.3.5 Contribution to Hybrid-identity**

Each of the relationships just presented occur simultaneously during gameplay in varying degrees and are intertwined to such an extent that makes they must be discussed together within the context of the process of gameplay. For example, all players must be logged in to the game world through an avatar, therefore, all *player/player* interactions essentially occur through their avatars, making the *player/player* relationship an embedded interaction within the *avatar/avatar* relationship. While it has just been demonstrated that the *player/player* relationship can occur outside of the game space and therefore removed from the avatar body, players interact with other players in various circumstances but the interactions are still situated within the gameplay context. This is not to say that both relationships bear the same defining characteristics, but that they are inherently intertwined.

These relationships are also interdependent on one another due to the nature of videogame play as a technologically mediated interaction. In order for a player to play a videogame, they must navigate the game's environment through an avatar. Therefore, no matter to what extent each relationship is realized, they each exist in some capacity within MMOG gameplay. Hybrid-identity develops through the process of the interaction between relationships.

Although this framework is useful to explain the elements that make up the *player/avatar* relationship within the game space proper, it is necessary to broaden the scope of inquiry to look not only at the relationships that occur within the game space, but to also look beyond the game world, and consider both the technology and the player as separate units of interaction. A primary difference moving forward with this framework is the development and role of the avatar in MMOG's as compared to other genres. Within MMOG design, the player is responsible for creating and developing their avatar within a loosely defined narrative and often open-ended goal structure. There are no cut-scenes (cinematic vignettes) to contextualize the MMOG gameplay for the player or to drive the narrative further.

This is in direct contrast with many single-player games which are often centered around a fixed narrative, where the player-character is funnelled through a relatively narrow set of tasks and challenges to come to a finite ending. While players may be able to select which character they would like to play from a limited selection and have navigational control over the avatar, they are rarely in complete control of their creation and actions within the confines of the game. Of course, there are exceptions, as can be seen in single-player role-playing games such as *Dragon Age* (Electronic Arts, 2009), the action-adventure game *The Godfather* (Electronic Arts, 2006), or the more open-ended sandbox style adventure found in the *Grand Theft Auto* series (Rockstar Games, 1997 – 2009), where players have more freedom to create an individualized player-character before entering a less structured narrative, often with multiple possible endings.

The decrease in freedom of creation and control inherently alters the *player/avatar* relationship significantly. In many single-player games, the *player/avatar* relationship shifts from the avatar being a form of player-created representation of self within the game world, to the avatar being a pre-determined set of embodied characteristics within a structured narrative. As the player controls the ready-made identity of the player-character, their ability to shape the avatar based on their individual desires and motivations through gameplay decreases.

To further understand the processes and conditions of hybrid-identity in single-player videogames, it is imperative to move away from a primarily socialized *player/avatar* focus, and demonstrate a broader range of player interactions that exist within this relationship in single-player gameplay. By exploring the types of actions performed by the player via the player-character within a single-player context, we are able to see what other elements influence the potential for hybrid-identity to emerge. While MMOG's are unavoidably social games, other genres are less dependent on *player/player* interactions, therefore inherently altering the elements outlined in the framework that contribute to the process of hybrid-identity development. Considering this factor, it is important to look at different genres of videogames to see how genre-specific elements contribute to the potential emergence of hybrid-identity, if at all, and to what extent. It is also imperative to move beyond the game-world, and acknowledge both the technology mediating the gameplay, and to expand the role of the player as a separate unit of interaction.

## 2.4 Expanding the Framework

To further understand the complex nature of videogame play and hybrid-identity, the framework described earlier in this chapter is expanded to include three distinct, yet interacting, categories. The categories added to the framework are the player, the mediating technologies, and the game system. The *player* category includes player choices and actions, individual experiences, perception and identification. The *mediating technologies* category includes the apparatus that facilitates gameplay (such as console, handheld device or computer), the controller that controls in-game movement and action, as well as the screen that mediates the gameplay. Finally, the *game system* category, which is broader than the game environment, and includes the avatar (player-character), geography and physics of the game, game specific narratives, artefacts within the game, rules of the game, gestures and performances that are prescribed by the game's design and interface, as well as the particular genre conventions that construct the atmosphere and context of gameplay. The specific elements listed within each category are not meant to be exhaustive, and can be extended or contracted depending on the particular game title and play context.

### 2.4.1 The Process of Gameplay

These three categories exist within a operational circuit similar to Hayles' (1999) cybernetic loop. Although initial engagement is required by the player to begin the reciprocal process, once initiated, the player becomes an equal part of the system. The player and the game system are never in direct contact – they are always mediated through the technical elements that enable gameplay. Within this triadic relationship, we can conceptualize the original framework as a series of relationships that occur within and

through all three categories. Depending on the context and specificities of each game, the relationship between the player and the avatar is altered through the process of mediation and re-articulation that takes place during gameplay.

While it was implicitly understood (or consciously assumed) in the game-centric model of the framework, the mediating technology category was never considered within the process of gameplay, since the primary focus of previous research was on the player and in-game interactions. By broadening the scope of the framework, a greater range of actions are able to be considered within the process of game analysis, allowing a deeper deconstruction of the complexity of gameplay and its relation to the emergence of hybrid-identity.

#### **2.4.2 The Player & Mediating Technology**

The cyclical process of videogame play has been described by different game studies scholars for the purpose of contextualizing varying aspects of the gameplay experience (Arsenault & Perron, 2009; Ermi & Mayra, 2007; Juul, 2005). Although there are fundamental similarities among the different descriptions, each serve specific research objectives. The following section will articulate the interactive relationship(s) that exist between the overarching categories while redefining the original framework . This will enable a broader understanding of the gameplay process which includes not only player actions and game design, but will also account for the technology that mediates the gameplay.

Beginning with the interactions that are executed between the player and the mediating technology (ex: console, controller, computer, screen, etc.) in a direct, physical

sense, the player must initiate game through the hardware that hosts the gameplay. This can be considered the first level interaction, peripheral yet integral to the interlocking framework of actions that has the potential to lead to identity construction of any sort. As the player manipulates the controller (by clicking on buttons or twisting joy-sticks , etc.) to navigate their way through the introductory menus, gameplay tutorials, and cinematics, the player enters into a reciprocal physical relationship with the hardware. This relationship is one that is hardwired by the designers of the videogame, as well as the device itself that is intended to be the same for all players. While this is debatable (some players may watch intently, while others may walk away from the game while the cut-scene plays, or try to skip them entirely), the designed intent of the player's interaction with the device remains the same; push X button to enter a menu; turn the left joystick to pan around a room, etc. Once the initial physical contact with the mediating technology has occurred, more complex mediated interactions can then be deciphered.

One such interaction is that of usability. Usability is carefully mapped out and tested by the game designers to ensure continuity of action between the player and the informational and ludic content on the screen. If the mapping is successful and navigation is intuitive and fluid, there is the potential for the player to become less aware of their physical actions of pushing buttons and enters a state of concentration on the content of the screen and in the game world. The player's physical actions with the device is what controls the action on the screen, but in a way that is absent-minded – embodied. This embodiment is part of what is described as a cybernetic feedback loop discussed by

Giddings & Kennedy (2008), Harvey (2009), Hayles (1999), and Westecott (2008). Following Friedman (1995),

... what makes interaction with computers so powerfully absorbing - for better and worse - is the way computers can transform the exchange between reader and text into a feedback loop. Every response you make provokes a reaction from the computer, which leads to a new response, and so on, as the loop from the screen to your eyes to your fingers on the keyboard to the computer to the screen becomes a single cybernetic circuit (§ 3).

If we extrapolate the reader and text to mean the player and game, we can see how the process of interaction is essential to the gameplay experience. Friedman (1995) later attempts to describe what it is like to be part of the cybernetic flow when playing a computer game;

It's very hard to describe what it feels like when you're 'lost' inside a computer game, precisely because at that moment your sense of self has been fundamentally transformed. Flowing through a continuous series of decisions made almost automatically, hardly aware of the passage of time, you form a symbiotic circuit with the computer... The computer comes to feel like an organic extension of your consciousness, and you may feel like an extension of the computer itself (§ 28).

While it could be argued that it takes a skilled player to reach a state of gameplay expertise where the player's actions and reactions are engulfed in a seamless 'symbiotic circuit' with the computer itself, creating an 'organic extension of consciousness', when a

player does enters such a state, it is easy to see how this type of relationship has the potential to form identity, whether in the player themselves, their avatars on screen, or in the form of an external, hybrid form of identity that melds the two together. Indeed, Hayles (1999) discusses the concept of embodied knowledge through what she calls ‘incorporating practices’ which is an “action that is encoded into bodily memory by repeated performances until it becomes habitual” (p. 199). Essentially, it is through these repetitive, interactive loops of organic actions and coded responses that the spaces of identity construction flourish.

This level of embodiment is often said to be part of what enables the state of ‘flow’ required for immersion to occur (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Harvey, 2009). However, for Ryan (1994), the physical, tactile interaction with the material hardware grounds the player in physical space, essentially interfering with the possibility of pure immersion within (any) game world. Nonetheless, the interaction between the player and the controller is one that creates an “... individual cybernetic connection between player and machine” which “... is often an intensely personal experience, and a transformative one” (Freidman, 1995, ¶ 42). While there is much more to the cybernetic process to be found within the individual components of gameplay, the interaction with the device is of paramount importance to the process, for without it, no other actions would be possible.

The idea of symbiotic relationships with computers (and technology) dates back several decades, however, the depth of interactivity and engagement found in videogame play, as compared to other forms of human computer interaction, allows the player to engage with technology on a level unparalleled by any other application to date. This



excludes promises of pure interactive immersion through virtual reality technology such as head gear, and full body immersive environments discussed by Murray (1997), and literature on telepresence and immersion as seen in the work of Steuer (1992) as there remains little examples of successful, mass marketed videogames that make use of true ‘virtual reality’ technology. The interactions that occur between the mediating technologies and the game system are fundamentally enrobed in electronics, computer coding, and game design. While the technical specifics will not be dealt with here, the process of this interaction within the overarching categories is relevant to the process of gameplay.

As the player initiates interaction with the game world via the technology, there is a communication system that occurs between the mediating technology and the game system. Depending on the success (or failure) of this system of communication, gameplay has the potential to be altered. For example, if a player is required to press a button on the controller to make their avatar jump in the game, the action will be successful if it is timed with the movement on the screen. Unfortunately, this seemingly simple task can fail for a number of reasons – from a low battery signal on a wireless controller, to an error in the coding of the game causing the action to be delayed or not performed at all. These breaks in continuity between the technology that mediates gameplay action, and the action within the game space can have an effect on the way a player relates to the game’s environment, and ultimately, to their avatar. Although the interaction between the mediating technology and the game system is initiated by the player, once instigated, the game system responds to the technology that mediates the player’s action. From interfaces to player-character movement, camera angles and sound, the relationship between the two categories creates a

feedback loop that in turn feeds the player with the necessary stimulus information to maintain gameplay.

The type of mediating technology is also relevant to the actions that occur within the game space. Different videogame consoles have different controllers that boast variations on the notion of ergonomic design. Different controllers often have different button schemas that a player has to learn for gameplay to become instinctual. Computer gameplay that uses a keyboard and a mouse requires the player to reconsider the way they position their hands to control gameplay, which may not feel natural to the player. Personal computers (as opposed to game consoles) have traditionally been a better choice for certain types of videogames, specifically first person shooters (Gkikas, Nathanael & Marmaras, 2007), as the technology behind the control schema is deemed to be more precise. Whereas stand alone consoles favour other types of games for different reasons. For instance, racing games are often said to be best on a console due to the intuitive button mapping designed for the controller.

Physical distance between player and the screen that mediates the game system is another thing to consider when looking at the ways in which the game system is mediated by the technology that supports gameplay for the player. Depending on the size and quality of the screen, players must negotiate different visual cues in different circumstances. For example, there has been a shift in tele-visual technology that favours high-definition transmission. This is most evident in the ways in which videogames have integrated textual elements within the user interface, particularly in cases where the fonts are quite small and

only legible if the player owns a high definition television. If not, the player is most likely to miss out on the textual clues designed into the game.

These are only a few examples of the ways in which the game system is mediated by the technologies that enable gameplay and how the ways in which the player exists within the networked system. As technology evolves, and the context and boundaries of gameplay shifts, as well as accounting for the genre and title of any given game, the defining elements will alter, making each gameplay session a unique opportunity to explore the potential process of hybrid-identity emergence.

## **2.5 Methods: Applying the Framework**

New media and games suffer from a certain degree of indeterminacy: one cannot guarantee that two readers will encounter the same media assets while interacting with a game, or that they will experience them in the same order. Nor can one guarantee that they will observe and attend to the same details of the experience (Bizzocchi & Tannenbaum, 2011, p. 272).

Indeed, while the videogame is a discreet artefact within its own coded boundaries, through the act of gameplay, each player brings with them a different perspective based on a wide array of external factors, inherently altering the gameplay experience. Even though the designer's goal is to create a consistent experience for all players, especially in the case of narratively structured single-player videogames, they cannot account for each player on an individual level. As such, no one reading of any videogame can define every possible experience.

Using autoethnographic research methods (Anderson, 2006; Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011) and analytical close-reading techniques (Bizzocchi & Tannenbaum, 2011), the framework aids in organizing individualized gameplay experiences within a structured network. This makes it possible to focus on the gameplay as an overall process that includes the player, but is not wholly dictated by either the individualized play experience nor solely by the game's design. Used in this manner, the framework can also illustrate how the range of different player experiences contribute to the emergence of various types of identity during gameplay.

Autoethnography can be defined as “an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience. ... A researcher uses tenets of autobiography and ethnography to do and write autoethnography. Thus, as a method, autoethnography is both process and product” (Abstract, Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011). As such, the following chapters concentrate on my personal gameplay which has been systematically analyzed within the structured framework described earlier in this chapter.

The framework detailed throughout this chapter was developed as a methodological tool in response to this reality. By systematically disentangling different parts of the gameplay from the overall networked process, it is possible to identify the ways in which individual games guide the gameplay experience. Depending on the genre and title, different games necessarily focus on different aspects of the framework. In illuminating the extent to which each element within the framework occurs during gameplay, and including

any new elements that may arise during the play process, it is possible to postulate the various types of identity a particular title may elicit.

While the overall goal of analysing gameplay into the segmented framework elements is to define the possible conditions for the emergence of hybrid-identity within various contexts of videogame play, it is not possible to construct a meta-framework that will serve all games in all conditions, since the conditions are partially based on perception and identification on behalf of the player. As such, the current iteration of the framework is not intended to be a fixed lens of analysis, but rather as a guiding frame open to potentially game or genre-specific elements. In this context, the overall objective of the analysis is to identify the changes and fluctuations within the framework, and discuss the potential for hybrid-identity to develop.

Through an systematic analysis, the forthcoming chapters will investigate the extent to which the existing framework functions to frame gameplay analysis, to illustrate potentially new elements that emerge through the study of various genres in different play contexts, and finally, to assess the potential and conditions necessary for hybrid-identity to emerge. Understanding that there is no one ‘true’ reading of any played game, the auto-ethnographic analysis aims to demonstrate the framework as an analytical tool while simultaneously offering personalized examples to show that the potential for identities to emerge exists somewhere between play and design.

At the end of each game analysis chapter, the elements within the framework will be plotted out in a chart to illustrate their prominence during gameplay. The chart will use a scale of zero to ten, zero being not present at all and ten representing the most prominent

aspect of gameplay. Prominence of each element will be determined through the cumulative notation of the perceived frequency of occurrence during gameplay after each play session. This includes, but is not limited to, qualitatively noting how often gameplay was focused on navigating the landscape, how much gameplay was focused on developing the player-character, and how much the gameplay relied on interactions between the player-character and non-playing characters (NPC's). The coded occurrences were then roughly counted and plotted on the scale of zero to ten. It should be clarified that this was not a precise quantitative calculation, but rather a qualitative assessment of the coded play notes.

One of the benefits of viewing the framework elements on a chart is the ability to quickly see the balance of element distribution for each game during the particular played experience. Depending on the perceived prominence of each element, and the conclusions made in determining the possible presence of hybrid-identity, it is possible to hypothesize which elements or balance of elements, contribute to the potential emergence of hybrid-identity.

### **2.5.1 Context**

While the selection of any particular game will inevitably alter the results of the analysis, the goal is to demonstrate the differences between games, and ultimately the genre they are most often associated with. Therefore, the individual games themselves are not the focus point of this research, nor are the analyses intended to be a critic of the games. Rather, they are meant to act as case studies used to exemplify the variations of processes of identity construction in different single-player videogames. The three games selected for analysis were *Mirror's Edge* (EA Digital Illusions CE, 2008), *Alone in the Dark* (Eden

Games, 2008), and *Fable II* (Lionhead Studios, 2008). Each game was played to completion, ranging from approximately 30 to 45 hours of gameplay. As this dissertation is centered around the played experience, videogame play was recorded and stored on an external hard drive for the extraction of screenshots and narrative references.

*Mirror's Edge* is often considered to be a 'first-person action-adventure'. Players are limited to a first-person perspective during gameplay, often only seeing the hands and feet of the playable character. The game is grounded in an explicit narrative, however gameplay is centered predominantly on the successful completion of tasks centered around the navigation of the game's landscape for the advancement of the narrative and ultimately as a justification for the action. Combat in *Mirror's Edge* is limited and its avoidance is encouraged.

Generally, first-person action-adventure games combine elements from the first-person shooter (FPS), action and adventure genres. It is one of the most inclusive genres. Broadly defined, first-person action-adventure games combines the first-person perspective and constant pace of action from the FPS genre, non-combat gameplay such as "avoiding traps, jumping, running, completing tasks within a pressing time limit ... [the] exploration and/or puzzle-solving"<sup>4</sup> of the action genre and finally, the focus on narrative from the adventure genre.

*Alone in the Dark* (Eden Games, 2008) is classified as a 'survival horror game' but is often categorized as an action-adventure game as well. The game is played primarily in third-person perspective, however, there are moments within the game where the player has

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.mobygames.com/glossary/genres>

the option to change to a first-person perspective. The difference in perspective between *Mirror's Edge* and *Alone in the Dark* leads to significantly different gameplay experiences. Gameplay is structured around the navigation, exploration, and interaction with the gameworld in order to discover the narrative during which time the player will encounter combat situations with a variety of horrific enemies.

Survival horror games often draw on conventions of horror fiction and includes, but is not limited to, the focus on the supernatural and the unknown, use of the dark and other lighting techniques that obfuscate the player's vision, the use of sound as warning mechanism and creation of atmosphere (Perron, 2005). These aspects of the genre, among others, aim to elicit emotional, physical and physiological responses in the player. Survival horror gameplay often includes a de-emphasis on combat while focusing on puzzle solving and narrative development.

Finally, *Fable II* (Lionhead Studios, 2008) is a single-player role-playing game which is played primarily in a third-person perspective. The game follows a rich narrative in which the player is required to explore the gameworld, complete a multitude of quests, and battle towards an epic final encounter at the game. The player enters the gameworld through a predetermined main character, however the player has the ability to select their gender and have further influence on the development of the player-character during gameplay.

A defining characteristic of role-playing games is the ability for players to create and/or develop the player-character in respect to strength, ability and appearance. Role-playing games are heavily story-driven (Glasser & Soh, 2004, p. 5), yet offer open



gameplay environments where the player is able to travel and explore the world freely, often at their own pace. RPG's are typically fantasy-based, focus on the collection of artefacts for use during gameplay, and combat is traditionally composed of both magic and weaponry.

## Chapter 3: Mirror's Edge

Many single-player games are structured in a manner that directs the player through a maze of tasks and goals set within a fixed narrative working towards an often finite ending. During gameplay, the player is offered a range of opportunities to explore not only the gameworld laid out in front of them, but also to express and discover an array of identities, be it their own or that of the game's player-character. Depending on the genre and design of the game, these opportunities can be very limited or seemingly endless. Hybrid-identity is among the types of identity that has the potential to emerge through videogame play, but the question is – in what types of games and in what contexts does it occur?

Using the framework described in the previous chapter as a conceptual lens, this chapter will deconstruct the play process through an informed close-reading of the single-player game *Mirror's Edge* (EA/Dice, 2008). By focusing on specific play sequences, this close-reading will inform the analytical portion of the chapter, where I will disentangle the different types of identity that *Mirror's Edge* facilitates, the processes through which these occur, and question the potential for hybrid-identity to emerge. Although these sequences are from an auto-ethnographic perspective, while discussing the role of the 'imagined' or 'ideal' player as prescribed by the game's design necessitates the use of a generalized third person voice (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum, 2011). As such, the close-reading will be peppered with reflections regarding the generalized player as analytical necessity arises.

By employing a close-reading as the primary analytical method, it will be possible to develop a more complete understanding of the conditions necessary for the emergence of

hybrid-identity in videogame play. It will also work towards reshaping and refining the current framework to address the specificities of different videogame genres and play contexts by addressing any new relationships, or elements, that arise during gameplay that are not included in the current framework.

### 3.1 Framing the Game

In *Mirror's Edge*, you play Faith, a Runner who uses speed and agility to traverse a dangerous world. Read your surroundings, reach your destination alive, keep moving. Timing and skill make the difference between success and failure.

...

There is no HUD while playing in Story mode. All information is provided visually from Faith's point-of-view" (p. 3, *Mirror's Edge* Game Manual).

A simple synopsis introduces the basic premise of the game. Embarking on a journey through the eyes and body of Faith Connor, a Runner (based on the sport of free-running<sup>5</sup> or Parkour<sup>6</sup>) who travels stealthily over a maze of rooftops spread across a

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<sup>5</sup>"Free running or freerunning is a form of urban acrobatics in which participants, known as free runners, use the city and rural landscape to perform movements through its structures".

([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Free\\_running](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Free_running))

<sup>6</sup>"Parkour (sometimes abbreviated PK) is the non-competitive sport of traversing mainly urban landscapes by running, climbing and jumping. Participants run along a route, attempting to navigate obstacles in the most efficient way possible, using only their bodies. Skills such as vaulting, rolling, swinging and wall scaling are employed". ( <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parkour>)

futuristic, heavily controlled city, trying to avoid detection on her courier missions; running and gathering momentum in order to leap from buildings, zip-line down pipes and wires and sliding under objects that would otherwise be impossible to pass. Speed and stealth replace combat in most gameplay situations as the player is rewarded for disarmament and penalized for killing enemies, engaging in combat only as a last resort and even then, never with the intent to kill, but only to escape. As such, there is a gamut of new skills to be learned. Instead of the aiming and shooting, ducking and covering that is typical of first person shooters (FPS), movements include sliding, tumbling, vaulting, running along walls, and shimmying across ledges. While the game offers two modes of gameplay – story and race mode – the following analysis stems solely from my engagement with the story mode of the game.

*Mirror's Edge* begins with an opening cinematic sequence to set the scene and to contextualize the purpose of gameplay. In a 2D animation that differs from the gameplay animation, the opening sequence shows Faith looking down on the city below, as she describes how a once vibrant city transitioned into an Orwellian state under constant surveillance. Through this transition, the voice-over explains in a hushed voice what happened those who 'refused to conform were pushed to the sidelines'; who resisted the authoritarian changes. As the non-conformists moved underground, there became a need for an alternative means of communication and methods of transportation of information. This was the job of the Runners; and ultimately, the role of Faith Connors.

Aesthetically, the game boasts clean, sharp lines with a cool color palette of whites, blues, blacks and greys with splashes of orange and red (figures 2, 3). The bursts of color

that exist within the game are often used as directional indicators for the player (this will be described in more detail within this chapter). While there are a few areas in the game that are gloomy and dimly lit, often using shades of dark green and greys, the dominant feel of the game is created primarily through the use of light, almost airy colors reflected in glass building facades, to create an open, unrestricted landscape. Further enhancing this sense of openness is the fact that there is no 'heads-up display' (HUD) to interfere with the visual experience of running through the cityscape. The lack of a HUD also amplifies the first-person perspective. The absence of this visual reference further enhances the sleek look and uninhibited feeling of open space during gameplay.



*Figure 2: Cool Whites of a Canal*



*Figure 3: Sharp lines and punch of bright oranges*

Another aspect of the game that lends to the open feeling of gameplay is the fact that when Faith receives her objectives from the Runner's headquarters, there is no noticeable apparatus within the game that appears to transmit these messages. Faith does not have a radio to 'tune in' to, or a touch screen to access in order to receive them. The voice appears to come out of thin air as information is passed along as the situation requires. The lack of any material connection between the voice Faith hears, and its transmission works to strip away additional visual and perceptual layers that can potentially hinder (or at least overwhelm) the player experience.

### 3.2 The Player

As videogames are predominantly an interactive form, the player is central to gameplay. Although the game exists as a set of predetermined and prescribed actions bound within a scripted narrative, "... the videogame, does not function without the involvement and interaction of the player" (p. 410; Newman, 2002). From this perspective, the player is implicated in almost all aspects of the conceptual framework in one way or another, from the more obvious *player/game environment* interactions to the more passive – or perceptual – participation as can be seen in the *avatar/avatar* interactions.

Among the reasons *Mirror's Edge* was selected was that I wanted to begin with a game where I had an obvious level of character identification. Although I was not able to create or personalize the player-character, as seen in figure two, Faith and I share some visual characteristics. Faith and I are both female, our eyes are both almond shaped and dark, and I have often sported the same hairstyle as Faith.



*Figure 4: Faith (left), Me (right)*

While there are also differences between us, one could argue that Faith represents an idealized version of myself (Bessière, Seay & Kiesler, 2007), and the mastery of her actions within the game-space enable me to experience alternate realities (Klimmt, Heffner, & Vorderer, 2009). Although partially true, there is more to the ways we identify and construct forms of identity during gameplay than through visual identification, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

### **3.2.1 Player/Player-Character**

As the only playable character in *Mirror's Edge*, Faith is dressed in a black tank top, light grey cargo pants and red running shoes. She sports a sharp, angular bob haircut with futuristic tribal tattoos below her right eye and down her right arm; Faith's style is urban and edgy. While her look is fitting to the overall aesthetic and narrative of the game, it is completely out of the player's control. As a playable character, Faith has a predetermined identity in which the player has little power to alter.

The manual that accompanies the game intertwines the intended actions of the player and those of the player-character Faith Connors. While the text appears to be

referring to the actions within the game as Faith's – it is *her* speed and agility that it is referring to in the opening quote, however, these traits are inextricably linked to the skill of the player. Yet, the language used in the game manual interweaves pertinent information for the player while simultaneously contextualizing Faith's role within the game to such an extent that it is difficult to know exactly who they are addressing. Flitting back and forth between a generalized 'you' (referring to the player), Runners (referring to generalized player-character profession within the game), and explicitly to Faith, as the specific (and only) player-character within the game, it is difficult at times to understand where the player instruction ends and Faith's narrative information begins. This reticulating between player and player-character raises the question as to how much of the player-character's narrative can be pre-scripted by the game as opposed to (or in conjunction with) the individual player skill level and imagination.

Faith's narrative in the introductory cinematic does not insinuate that she is a novice Runner, yet as a new player I was confronted with many hurdles related to the materiality of the controller that essentially altered the narrative and gameplay experience. While I worked towards learning the control schemes tied to game-specific movements, Faith fails her assigned objectives (or during gameplay, dies) quite often. The question then begs, is the failure of objectives Faith's failures or are they explicitly the failure of myself as a player? To what extent does the game design override player experience and vice versa?

In what could be viewed as an attempt to reconcile the player's skill and Faith's ideal level of ability, the tutorial portion of the game briefly introduces Faith's story. The training is contextualized in a voice-over by 'Mercury', the character who trains Runners



and provides assignments and directions to Faith throughout the game. He explains that since Faith has been out of commission for a while (for undisclosed reasons), he thinks it is in her best interest to brush up on some of her moves. Although it is apparent that Mercury is talking directly to Faith, the information he is communicating is clearly intended for the player.

Throughout the training, the player has the ability to fail the set task without any repercussions to Faith or the game's narrative. Through many failures and repeated attempts, this portion of gameplay is wholly intended for the player. It is hard to imagine that Mercury would have taken Faith back on as a Runner had her skill been anywhere near that of the novice game player attempting to navigate and control Faith's movements.

In this case, any narrative experience beyond Mercury's rationalization of the training session is derived predominantly by the player's experience and imagination. While the player may continue to practice the controls to master the various moves among the (limited) network of rooftops for hours on end, the game's scripted narrative does not account for multiple failures or repetition. The practice portion of the game does not move the narrative forward; it simply introduces the tools necessary for gameplay. It is in the tutorial section that the player is introduced to Celeste – an experienced Runner, and Faith's friend – as she is brought in to refresh Faith's memory on how to make a clean run through the city's rooftops.

After Mercury's initial introduction, there is no dialogue exchange between him or Celeste, and Faith. Celeste waves to Faith to follow her through a series of obstacles, but does not vocally encourage or explain anything; this is done by small text boxes that pop up

just before the player regains control of Faith and fade away as the task is completed. It is only after the successful completion of the parcoure portion of the training does Celeste speak again, only to inform Faith that they will be sparring in the next bout of training.

### **3.2.1.1 Player Ability**

As a novice player, I realized that mastery comes before enjoyment even though the tutorial does not require it. In order to continue on into the game, I only needed to successfully complete the tasks set out before me; whether it took one try or a hundred. After an hour or so of trying to cross a tight-rope, I had become frustrated at my inability to line up Faith's feet with the wire and successfully control her movement with the joystick to make it across. Eventually, I asked a friend to take over the controls in order to help me complete the task. I felt I had enough fundamental understanding of the gameplay mechanics in order to move on and just wanted to get into the game itself. After one more attempt, Faith's successful crossing was rewarded by being able to enter the first level of the game. It did not reward me as a player; the game could not tell who was holding the controller, performing the actions; it could only recognize if the task had been successfully completed or not – as such, it rewarded successful completion, not the player specifically.

The development of the player's skill, dexterity, and agility plays a central role in the ways in which they identify with the action on the screen in terms of the narrative flow which has the potential to influence the player/player-character relationship. During the early stages of gameplay, I found myself fumbling with the controls to such an extent that meaningful gameplay was almost impossible. The action on the screen was jerky, the animation was stop and go, with no fluid movement; progression by all definitions, was all

but stagnant. As failure and deaths increased, I became increasingly disengaged with the game as a narrative form. My attention shifted to the game mechanics as a concentrated set of skills that needed to be performed successfully in a particular sequence instead of the narrative that drives the purpose of play.

This shift in focus, from the desire to play within the game's narrative to consciously playing with the mechanics and button-mapping of the game, made me realize that in some ways, the game was not solely designed to engage me – the player – as an active agent within the narrative structure of the game, but rather as a technical tool to propel the action forward. This was reinforced by the dialogue between Mercury and Faith throughout the game. Although there were a few snide comments from Mercury as his impatience appeared to increase as Faith's failures did, these were directed at Faith – and not myself as the player who controls her. Yet, Mercury's remarks communicated a narrative tone to the player as well, insinuating the expectation of expertise in skill and performance.

As my skill was slow to improve, over time, Mercury's comments began to cycle through the same few phrases in the identical order as my failure to complete a set task continued. This repetition of dialogue led to me eventually tuning out his voice after the umpteenth time of being told to hurry up in six different ways. This transition from what began as a narrative device – Mercury's impatience with Faith acting as a communication tool not only between Mercury and Faith, but also offering a glimpse into their relationship – to a more mechanical, repetitive element of the gameplay, led to the disintegration of identification created by the links between myself as a player and Faith as my 'player-

character' during more fluid moments of gameplay. I became more and more aware of the technical aspects of the game; of the physicality of the controller instead of the connection between myself as a player and Faith as my player-controlled avatar within a set, structured narrative.

Although Faith is full of (designed) potential expertise, this expertise only goes as far as the skill and abilities of the player. For example, for all players, the potential role fulfillment of Faith's running ability is capped by game design. No matter how skilled a player becomes at controlling Faith, they will only ever be able to make her run as fast as the game is designed to do so. This does not mean that the overall gameplay experience is wholly determined by such technical limitations, it is also determined by what the player brings to that potential fulfillment that broadens the gameplay experience (Boudreau, 2005). Depending on the skill of the player, Faith's story can change in subtle ways that were perhaps unintended by the original narrative design. To an expert player, she may be an elite Runner, effortlessly navigating her way through the city's rooftops, accomplishing her missions in record time. Or, to a more novice player, Faith could be a Runner who never quite gets it right, requiring several attempts to clear even the simplest of obstacles. Either of these scenarios is possible, as they not fully determined by the game's design insomuch as the player's skill.

The linking of Faith's abilities to that of the player creates a relationship between the player and the player-character that is predominantly controlled by the player's skill set even though Faith an inherent skill level preset in her design. Although the game has a set identity carved out for Faith within her set narrative, the player can uniquely add to that

identity through their gameplay choices and the meaning that they attribute to the actions they bring to the game. Each player will develop a different relationship based on a range of factors including individualized learning curves, pre-existing videogame related skills, personal manual dexterity, as well as various forms of identification that are tied to personal experience and expectations that are brought into each gameplay session.

As the player develops a more fluid control of the player-character's actions, the separation between player and player-character has the potential to dissipate, enabling the player to experience the actions on the screen more directly. Through breaking down of perceptual boundaries, the player's experience can shift from simply being engaged with the game on an interactive (or mechanical) level – learning the sequence of buttons to create movement on the screen – to being engrossed in the production of meaningful content through successful navigation and completion of tasks and goals set by the game's design. While this is often defined as the state of 'flow' in videogame play (Cowley, Charles, Black & Hickey, 2008; Tronstad, 2009)<sup>7</sup>, it is something that fluctuates as new challenges arise and the player is faced with another set of skills to learn. As Ermi and Mayra iterate in their chapter "Fundamental Components of the Gameplay Experience: Analyzing Immersion", "... in the context of digital games, flow-like phenomena seem only to be fleeting experiences, which in turn suggests that they are something different from flow as traditionally conceived" (2007, p. 41).

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<sup>7</sup> Based on Csikszentmihályi's book *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (2007).

### 3.2.1.2 Player control

During the training, Faith is told to follow Celeste – another experienced Runner – as she demonstrates the training moves for Faith. Yet, even though Celeste explicitly instructs Faith to ‘follow me’, the game takes over briefly forcing the player to watch until Celeste has completed her sequence. In such instances where the game removes the control from the player, there is the potential for a loss of connection between the player and the player-character. Although this kind of break is contextually necessary and at times, even desirable, as it allows the player an opportunity to ‘watch’ before ‘doing’, it also has a potential to negatively impact the *player/player-character* relationship. The interruption in player control reminds them that they are not truly in control of the player-character; that regardless of what they do, the game design has accounted for certain actions and behaviours beyond (or despite) the player’s input.

There are other player-character actions that occur outside the scope (and control) of the player that also have the potential to sever the connection between the player and the player-character. For instance, when the player goes idle during the training session, Faith will crack her knuckles. The first time this happened, I was slightly taken aback – up until this point, outside of the training session and scripted cut-scenes, I had controlled all of Faith’s on-screen actions. It was only in a moment of hesitation, where I paused to reflect on my options across a series of rooftops did I lose control of Faith’s movements – as she cracked her knuckles restlessly, and appearing to look at her hands. Since gameplay occurs in a first person perspective, it was a rather disjunctive scene, as up until this point I considered the view of Faith’s hands as an extension of my own body. In my mind, they

were connected to (and represented) my hands – visually extending my hands holding the controller into the frame of the action.

This rupture between player-controlled and fixed (or predetermined) actions of the player-character is another way in which the player is reminded that while they control *some* of Faith's actions, she remains an entity outside of themselves. Even though a player may expect these types of breaks during scripted cut-scenes, the unexpected disruptions in player control during what one would assume to be active (and therefore uninterrupted) gameplay generally weakens the bond between the player and the player-character. Essentially, it is in these moments of disassociation that the player is reminded that the player-character on the screen is not simply a 'representation' of themselves; that it is not there solely for their needs or purposes. These moments call attention to the fact that the player-character is first and foremost a designed entity that existed prior to, and outside of, the player's choices and actions even if the game is played in first-person perspective.

### **3.2.1.3 Player Control & Cut-Scenes**

Narrative driven videogames most often use various forms of cinematics to introduce and drive the story that gives both meaning and purpose to gameplay. Howells describes the different purposes of cinematics succinctly as they are utilized in gameplay;

The intro movie introduces characters and scenario (the 'game world') and establishes the game's fundamental conflict, while subsequent cut-scenes continue causal lines, introduce new plot elements, show character interaction and continually delineate explicit goals. Once the goals have been stated, the player moves to an action sequence where he or she

overcomes a series of smaller obstacles en route to the larger one. After finally accomplishing this larger goal (often a ‘boss’ enemy or large-scale puzzle), another cut-scene shows the effects of the player’s actions and introduces a new goal (2002, p. 113).

*Mirror’s Edge* uses two separate types of animation styles to convey the different levels of narrative. The introductory movie and the cinematics at the end of a battle or chapter of play bear the same animation style that is distinctly different than the gameplay animation. Whereas the in-game cut-scenes are in the same animation as active gameplay. While it is clear that the animation style signifies a particular level of narrative for the player, the differentiation also serves another function for the player: delineating the break between the narrative controlled by the player, and that which is controlled solely by the game’s design.

The break in player control comes early in the first chapter. In one of the first in-game cut-scenes (figure 5), we are introduced to Faith’s sister – Kate – as she calls Faith for help when she realizes she is being framed for the murder of a mayoral candidate. In this scene the action still occurs from Faith’s (and by association the player’s) point-of-view, the camera does not pan out to show Faith’s body, instead maintaining Faith’s visual perspective. Although the player loses physical control of Faith and the ability to change vantage points or perspectives, the cut-scene occurs in the same animation style as the gameplay (figure 6), which keeps the player within the aesthetic associated with player-control.





*Figure 5: In-game cut-scene seen from Faith's point-of-view*



*Figure 6: Active gameplay animation*

In using the same animation for both active gameplay and in-game cut-scenes, even though the player loses control of the player-character and camera, Howells argues that the player is able to transition between 'player' and 'spectator' seamlessly (p. 117). What is also interesting about this particular example is that the action in the cut-scene continues to occur 'around' Faith's visual perspective without disrupting the relationship between the player and the player-character. Whereas most cut-scenes would pan out on the player-character, repositioning them into a third-person role outside of the player's control, forcing the player into a role of pure spectator, by maintaining Faith's point-of-view, the player can still feel as though the action in the scene is happening to them. When Kate speaks to Faith, she gazes directly into the camera making eye contact with Faith, which acts to connect the player to Faith as one being.

The second style of animation in *Mirror's Edge* can be seen in the introductory cinematic and after the completion of each chapter (figure 7). They have the feeling of being lifted off the pages of a comic book, with flatter 2D images, bearing less detail and sharper, heavier lines.



**Figure 7:** *Cut-scene animation between chapters*

These scenes take place in the Runner's central headquarters and transmit additional narrative information which form the foundation of upcoming missions while alluding to complex relationships within the game. As is standard in cut-scenes, the player has no control over Faith in these vignettes, yet the disconnect between player and player-character goes beyond that of control as the player is taken outside of Faith's visual perspective grown familiar during gameplay. Faith is seen in her entirety, distinctly separating Faith – and her narrative – from that of the player.

Although at first glance, one would assume that this loss of control and change in perspective and animation would sever ties developed between the player and Faith, it could be argued that this shift in animation style can be useful in keeping the *player / player-character* relationship in tact since visually, the playable version of Faith is aesthetically different than the more animated version of Faith. This aesthetic difference creates a divergence between gameplay and narrative; potentially separating Faith as the

playable-character and Faith that the pre-set ‘character’ in the player’s perspective. This type of distinction offers the player the potential to engage with the content of the game’s narrative on different levels which does not necessarily imply a break in the player/player-character relationship.

#### **3.2.1.4 Player/Non-Playing-Characters**

There are many interactions that occur during gameplay between the player and non-playing-characters (NPC) that influence both the way a player situates themselves within the game, as well as how they relate to the player-character. As McMahan (2003) explains in her chapter “Immersion, Engagement, and Presence”, “the use of a synthetic social actor also can lead to a heightened sense of presence.” (p. 78). This can be seen through the primary relationship between Faith and her ‘tracker’, Mercury – often colloquially referred to as “Merc” – throughout the game. Although Merc’s primary role is to inform Faith of her missions and to track her movements throughout the cityscape in an attempt to avert danger, the language used by Merc suggests a comfortable, friendly relationship between himself and Faith; a relationship where his instructions and advice predicates not only a professional relationship between a runner and her tracker, but perhaps a deeper relationship that may carry some personal history as well.

It is clear that the information passed along the air waves is intended to inform the player where to go or to explain what is expected of them. Even though Merc never addresses the player directly, it is understood that Faith is a conduit of information for the player, blurring the line between the player and the player-character. This type of dialogue exchange works to strengthen the bond between both playing and non-playing characters in

a way that draws the player into the game's narrative, potentially promoting more meaningful gameplay for the player. For example, during gameplay, if the player takes too long to navigate Faith through the landscape, Merc will engage in one-way banter, telling Faith that if she wants to get paid, she better get a move on. This banter serves to create a character narrative between Faith and Merc, but it also acts as a gentle nudging to the player to pick up the pace and to continue on with the gameplay.

In-game dialogue can serve multiple purpose such as communicating pertinent information to the player, to develop a character or further the narrative, or even to simply act as narrative filler. While Merc's voice-over serves two functions related to gameplay: to develop narrative bonds between in-game characters as well as to inform the player of information necessary for successful gameplay, it also serves a third, potentially unintended purpose of unifying the player with the player-character by connecting the player's actions to the player-character through both narrative and function. These two aspects of the game are in a constant state of flux through player-choices and actions. By insinuating a meaningful in-game relationship between characters through this kind of layered dialogue, the player may feel more connected to Faith, while also being engaged in the game in a way that is beyond the confines of the purely scripted version of Faith.

While synthesizing the research on 'the social context of virtual characters', Ochs, Sabouret and Corruble (2008) state in their article "Modeling the dynamics of Non-Player Characters' social relations in videogames" that "... the linguistic style of dialog between virtual characters is determined according to social variables (social distance and power) (Walker et al., 1997) and user's emotions (André et al. 2004)" (p. 90). Character

interactions are based on a ‘computational model of social characters’ (p. 91) that is designed into the game based on a desired narrative outcome.

The player is posited in the middle of the dynamic between the player-character and the NPC in any given dialogue system as the narrative power of the conversation only truly exists within the emotions of the player. Without being mediated through the player, the narrative exchange remains a predetermined, static exchange that carries only the prescribed meaning within the confines of the game environment. Through player mediation and interpretation, the dialogue can carry added meaning through which the player can base future gameplay actions. This also offers the player an opportunity to add depth to the scripted character beyond the confines of the exchange and game narrative.

Interacting with enemy NPC’s offers the player an opportunity to understand Faith’s scripted personality, and find ways to relate to or expand on it. For example, while the game boasts a shift from the popular high-intensity combat gameplay of many first-person action games, to a focus on stealth, agility, and speed, there are moments where attack or disarmament is necessary. There is no immediate signal as to which enemy can be avoided and which ones need to be attacked – therefore, depending on the gameplay objectives and style of the player, and based on how the player perceives the character that is Faith, they will either challenge every enemy – or attempt to flee when an enemy is spotted.

### **3.2.2 Player/Game Environment**

Although all player interactions that occur with the game system take place *within* the game world in some capacity, there are many actions that are explicitly *with* the game’s environment including game specific geography and landscape, visual scope (or field of

vision), and in-game audio. Interactions that exist with the environment on the visual level occur directly between the player and the visual representation of the gameworld on the screen, whereas interactions that take place on a geographical level is mediated through the virtual physicality of the player-character.

### **3.2.2.1 Visual Effects**

From illustrating fiction and geography to acting as a conveyer of necessary information and meaning for the player, visual effects are a core component of videogames. Although there are a plethora of visual elements in the game that are out of the player's control, this section aims to offer a few examples of the visual effects that come about in light of player actions and that are designed to communicate meaning by connecting the images on the screen to the player's actions.

One of the most prominent examples in *Mirror's Edge* of such visual references that are inherently connected to the game's environment can be seen in what is called 'Runner Vision'. As described in the accompanying gameplay manual, "Conduits and pathways are highlighted in red against the pale landscape. This is Runner Vision, and it shows Faith where she needs to go" (Game Manual, p. 3). Runner Vision (below, figure 8) only appears as Faith approaches areas and objects that are necessary for the successful navigation of the game's geography. Runner Vision is tied to the game's difficulty settings, and can also be turned off by the player.



*Figure 8: Red highlighted objects signify the Runner's path, while the orange highlighted areas represent destination.*

I began to play the game on easy to get a feel for the controls and be able to navigate the game world in a slightly more relaxed atmosphere than had I began on a higher level. As such, I used Runner Vision to its fullest extent, always scanning the landscape for red and orange indicators before moving forward. However, I quickly learned that while Runner Vision indicates to the player where they are supposed to go, it does not necessarily make navigating the landscape any easier of a task. I found this out very early on, as I was trying to navigate my way through the first series of rooftops. Taking a moment to locate and make mental note of the red highlighted sections ahead, I tried to figure out the order in which I was supposed to access each object. From a distance, there is no indicator that says 'go here first, then slide over there'. Through trial and a lot of error, I had figured out the prescribed path, but not before realizing that not every single object that must be used in order to successfully navigate the path is highlighted. While the path is demarcated, there are enough gaps in between to make following the path challenging.

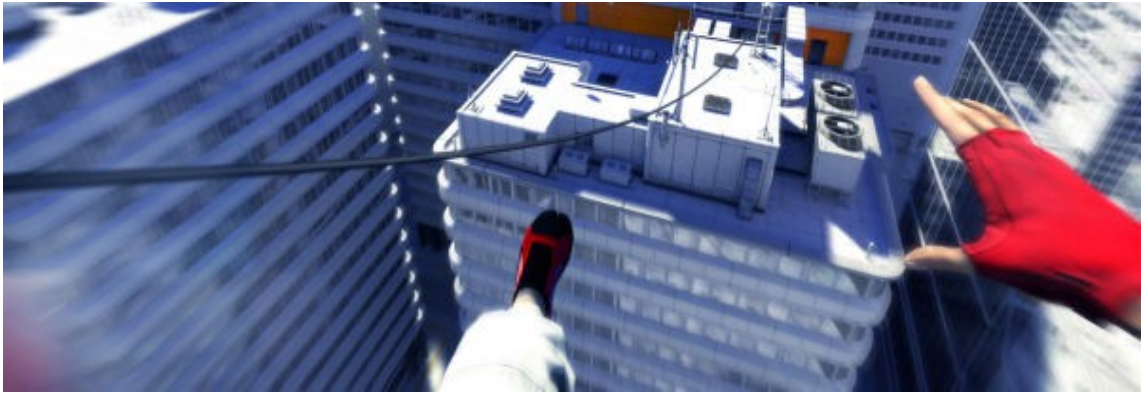
While it could be argued that using Runner Vision takes away from the challenge of gameplay, or that it decreases the potential for an immersive – or at least believable – gameplay experience (there would never be such indicators painted across the landscape!), it also connects the player to the game environment in a way that it's absence does not.

Runner vision allows the player to engage with the game world as a series of de-contextualized objects before reconnecting them into a series of potential action. Another useful aspect of Runner Vision can be seen during encounters with enemy NPC's as it also highlights an enemy's gun red prior to a melee attack. If you can successfully press the counter button at this time Faith will perform a disarm, if not then the enemy is able to shoot or continue their melee attack. Finally, there is also a slow-motion option that enables the player to slow the action down for a moment allowing the player an opportunity to react to the attempted melee, and disarm the enemy.

At its core, Runner Vision is a game mechanic that is solely in place for the benefit of the player even though the manual attempts to associate it's necessity to the player-character. There is no inherent connection between Faith and Runner Vision; there is no pre-rendered, designed gravitational pull forcing the player to direct Faith to the highlighted areas. It does, however, act as a tool that replaces the need for maps within the game, freeing up the need for a HUD. As a difficulty level is increased, Runner Vision is decreased (or, as previously mentioned, the player may opt out of this feature in the options menu), making its presence directly correlated to player skill and necessity, and not to Faith's ability and the game's narrative.

Another visual effect that links the player to Faith during gameplay is the blurring of vision (figure 9). The edges of the screen, which represents Faith's field of vision, become increasingly blurred as her speed increases. The blurring effect is amplified the faster Faith goes, increasingly obscuring the scope of vision of the game environment.





*Figure 9: Blurred Vision depicting momentum*

While increasing speed during a level is not required by the game design, building momentum is a key aspect of gameplay in that it not only demonstrates player skill, but it also has the potential to lead to a deeper sense of immersion during gameplay. A fast, clean run can instil a feeling of exhilaration; increasing the player's heart rate and breathing, which is visually represented by the blurring of vision on the screen, connecting Faith's (vitals) with those of the player. As Kirkpatrick (2009)<sup>8</sup> explains in his article "Controller, Hand, Screen: Aesthetic form in the computer game",

Rapid exploration of the game, according to its logic of discovery, generates a feeling of coherence and a pleasing sense of closing the temporal game between, on the one side, the many deaths and re-tries of playing, and on the other, the time of the game fiction (p. 133).

Within *Mirror's Edge*, this closing of the temporal gap is visually represented through the blurring of vision when the game's action, and in consequence, its fiction, is not interrupted by multiple deaths and re-tries. This visual representation was rarely seen in the beginning

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<sup>8</sup> Kirkpatrick later expands this sixteen page article into a 32 page chapter in his 2011 book *Aesthetic Theory and the Video Game*.

of my gameplay, as death and re-tries were the norm as I worked towards developing the necessary skills (both dexterous and memory) to be able to achieve the visual effect of blurred vision. As such, it could be argued that this type of visual effect not only represents a diegetic meaning – that Faith has amassed so much speed that her vision begins to blur – but also bears the non-diegetic meaning that the player possesses the skill to influence the game’s visuals.

Perhaps one of the most prominent, if not one of the most recurring visual cues designed into the game is the manner in which death (or injury) is represented. Since there is no health bar to check in on Faith’s vitals and no inventory screen to delve into for solace or healing, death is often swift and unexpected. Following the conventions of the FPS genre, once injured, the screen begins to turn red, and quickly fades to black around the edges (figure 10), creating tunnel vision as death closes in.



*Figure 10: Left, red screen symbolizing blood. Right, darkening of the screen creating tunnel vision as death is near.*

There is often very little time between the first tints of red and the blackness of tunnel vision signifying Faith’s looming fate, making death swift, and for the novice player, a common occurrence. The transition from red to black can occur so quickly that at times it

can be jarring as Faith is quickly returned to an earlier save point to try again. With a relatively short reload time, although deaths can be disruptive to the flow of gameplay, there is often little time to pause between death and retrying the failed sequence. This lack of delay can work towards keeping the player engaged with the game's fiction instead of reminding the player of their lack of physical ability to deftly manipulate the controls for smooth, successful gameplay, essentially keeping the gameplay feedback loop in motion.

### **3.2.2.2 Point-of-view**

According to the introductory quote, “all information is provided visually from Faith's point-of-view”. As Faith's point-of-view is inherently wrapped up in that of the player, the first-person perspective found in *Mirror's Edge* contributes to the blurring or altering of the perception of identity between the player and player-character. One of the most evident visual elements is the lack Faith's full body during gameplay, but the inclusion of limbs; the player can see Faith's hands, and lower body, as well as her shadow. As a ‘first person perspective’, this aims to create the illusion that the hands and lower body belong to the player, offering a subjective view. In discussing the subjective shot in relation to film theory, in his book *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (2006), Galloway states that “When the camera fuses with a character's body, the viewer sees exactly what the character sees, as if the camera, as if the camera ‘eye’ were the same as the character ‘I’. The camera merges with the character both visually and subjectively.” (p. 40).

While this subjective positioning aims to connect the player to the player-character, it also merges the visual point-of-view of the player to the visual scope of the player-character. This creates a combined perspective fusing both the human body of the player

and Faith's inferred, digital body. The fused perspectives acts to merge the process of primary and secondary identification, giving the illusion of the player being in the gameworld directly. In his chapter "As We Become Machines: Corporealized pleasures in video games" (2003), Lahti discusses the introduction of this technique in the game *Wolfenstein 3D* (1992) "As a representation of the player's hand (and / or weapon) as a sort of imaginary prosthesis, it links the player's body into the fictional world, again emphasizing a continuum between the player's world and that of the game" (p. 161).

Although the designed intent is to bring the player and the player-character together, it can also be jarring in moments where character control breaks away from the player. As described earlier, Faith will crack her knuckles or inspect her hands if I stay idle for too long. If the inclusion of limbs within the frame of the screen is meant to merge the player to the player-character, such actions sever this connection, reminding the player that while they may 'think' they are 'in' the game, they are not. This blurs the line between immersion and identification. If "identification is a mechanism through which audience members experience reception and interpretation of the text from inside, as if the events were happening to them" (Cohen, 2001; p. 245), how do we reconcile the role of the player, as one that both identifies with the non-interactive elements of the game such as cut-scenes, where the player gets to see Faith in her full body, and one that also actively participates in the narrative through gameplay as the player embodies her body to actively engage with the game world? As the control of the point-of-view shifts from the player to the player-character even within active gameplay, the player is forced to negotiate a pace that maintains the immersion not only through narrative, but also through the body.

### 3.2.2.3 Audio Elements

Another important game mechanic that serves multiple functions is the use of audio in the form of music, ambient, and game-related sounds. Music is often used as a design element to set the tone or atmosphere, to insinuate tensions within a particular scene, act as aural indication of foreshadowing, as well as to develop the player's perception of the game environment as a whole to name but a few uses. As Zehnder and Lipscomb (2006) articulate in their chapter "The Role of Music in Video Games", "... music serves as one important component of the spectrum of sound that includes the musical score, ambient sound, dialogue, sound effects, and even silence." (p. 243).

The majority of gameplay in *Mirror's Edge* is set to melodic electronic sounds if any are used at all. The ambient music is low to hear Faith's breath increase as she jumps across buildings and creeps stealthily along corridors. The reverberation of the zip line overpowers the music as Faith lets go and lands with a thud on a platform. The sounds are intimate; almost eerie. The overlapping of non-diegetic music with the diegetic sounds of the game – footsteps, Faith's breath, the zip-line – create an auricular narrative, layered to heighten the gameplay experience. A blending of 'interactive', or player controlled sounds, and 'adaptive' sounds, sounds that are "...unaffected by the player's direct actions..." (Collins, 2009; p. 6), produces a soundscape that is ultimately unique to each player and play session.

While it is understood that the music is designed primarily for the player – it is unlikely that the player-character is privy to the soundtrack as she runs through the labyrinth of rooftops and corridors – the music does not break the game's fiction. The diegetic sounds of Faith's body scraping the ground as she runs and slides under a closing

door is a sound not only audible to the player, but would also be audible to Faith herself, one could plausibly imagine Faith listening to the (non-diegetic) soundtrack in a pair of earbuds as she glides across the rooftops or swings across the rafters in a warehouse. It is only when the music shifts for narrative purposes is the player jolted out of this possibility as they are reminded that the music is indeed intended for them – the player and carries with it meaning beyond ambiance.

For example, the music shifts when Faith enters into a dangerous encounter, whether danger is looming or being confronted head on. In the final play sequence of the first chapter, Faith must escape an office complex. The music changes from being melodically ambient to an up-tempo, rhythmic sound – almost mimicking the sound of a heart beat. This audio shift informs the player that there is danger, and they should seek escape as soon as possible – whether or not the player can see any enemies in their field of vision. In this sense, the music “can contribute to the narrative (i.e., suspense) and the meta-narrative ...aspects of the video game experience” (Zehnder and Lipscomb, 2006, p. 243). Without the musical warning, the player would have otherwise (and perhaps inadvertently) walked into a dangerous situation unprepared. Furthermore, as “music also serves an important role in the cultivation of the sense of perceptual or psychological presence in the video game.” (p. 249), the player can become immersed both perceptually and physically in the action they aid in creating on the screen.

Whereas research in film studies surrounding the role of music in eliciting a psycho-physiological response in the spectator has worked towards explaining the ways a spectator perceives (and understands) the action on the screen (Grondal, 2009; Plantinga, 2009), due

to the physical interaction required to play a videogame, the physiological effects of music on the player goes beyond the development of perception (Hébert, et al., 2005; Kivikangas et. al., 2010; Nacke & Grimshaw, 2010). During intense moments of gameplay, the increased tempo can affect the player on a physiological level by, for example, raising their heart rate as they grip the controller tighter knowing that they have to manoeuvre the controls in the exact sequence if they are to successfully perform an attack move (or escape). Such physical reactions can directly affect gameplay as it relates to dexterity and player performance; gripping the controller tightly may impede the player's ability to input a button sequence, or the player's rapid breathing may influence their ability to align Faith's feet with a narrow ledge she is meant to nimbly shimmy across. This type of bodily reaction induced by the audio can work towards bonding the player to the action on the screen, solidifying the relationship created between the player and the player-character.

Diegetic sounds – or sounds that related to the fiction of the game – also play an important role in grounding the digital materiality of the game to the physical world of the player. Although a player can assume that Faith would be out of breath as she leaps over obstacles at breakneck speed, with the added dimension of audio they are able to relate the in-game sounds to those they are familiar with and make a claim on the 'reality' of the situation. This is not to say that the diegetic sounds must mimic 'reality', but rather that as long as the sounds are perceived to be believable to the player they can fulfill the role of linking in-game sounds (and actions) to their visual representations. Although Nacke and Grimshaw's 2010 chapter "Player-Game Interaction Through Affective Sound" has a

strong focus on the role that sound plays in the development of immersion, they articulate that;

The degree of realism provided by sound cues is also a primary facilitator for immersion, with realistic audio samples being drivers of immersion (Jorgensen, 2006), similar to employing spatial sound (Murphy & Pitt, 2001) although some authors, as noted by Grimshaw (2008b) argue for an effect of immersion through perceptual realism of sound (as opposed to a mimetic realism) where verisimilitude, based on codes of realism, proves an effective it not more efficacious than emulation and authenticity of sound (p. 272).

From this perspective, as long as the sound is believably real, it can be a powerful agent in connecting the player to the action on the screen. Moreover, the sound of Faith's breath is a direct reference to the energy (and expertise) of the player; the frantic button mashing during combat correlates directly to battle sounds emitting from the speakers, making the player directly responsible for the diegetic sounds.

Although the binary descriptor of diegetic and non-diegetic sounds describes the sounds that are either from within or external to the game's narrative, within videogames, there is another level of sound that is often attributed to player-actions that exist within the game but do not serve informational or communicative purposes (Galloway, 2006; Grimshaw, 2008; Jorgensen, 2010). An example of such a sound would be interface sounds as a player navigates through their inventory, or , etc. While the player has control over these sounds, they are not part of the narrative of the game. Even if derived from player



actions, they bear less (if any) gamic meaning: they do not aid the player understand content or context of the game.

### 3.3 Player-Character/Game Environment

Inherently tied to the visual aspects of the *player/game-environment* relationship and mediated through *player/player-character* interactions, *player-character/environment* interactions act as a connector between the player and the game world. Due to the intertwined nature of the this relationship, it is difficult to disentangle these actions from the others elements within the framework. As such, this section will focus primarily on the interactions between the avatar and the game-environment, but includes references to the other elements as well as they pertain directly to *player-character/environment* interactions.

#### 3.3.1 (re)Learning Spatiality

While all interactions within the game are predicated on the visual relationship between in-game objects (avatars, objects, etc.) and the player, players must learn to navigate the body of the player-character within the game's environment. Learning the perceptually abstract, yet very real boundaries is a challenge for most, if not all, players. Part of the difficulty lies in the fact that the player is not able to directly manipulate objects within the gameworld. It is not their hands that grip the gun, or their feet that scuttle along a ledge. The loss of direct physical interaction forces the player to re-evaluate the materiality of the gameworld through Faith's body.

Gameplay, is heavily focused on the game environment as the central locus of interaction. Spatiality is defined through the affordances of Faith's body. Although the

visual perception of the gameworld expands across a seemingly limitless skyline of rooftops and never-ending mazes of alleyways and corridors, the navigational space is limited by the boundaries of the game's design and Faith's physicality and the prescribed path. Even though the player may be able to see multiple options to get to the same place, the game determines the path by calculating spatiality based on what Faith can and cannot do.

Bayliss (2007) addresses this notion in discussing the navigational possibilities and perceptions of distance in *Tomb Raider* in respect to the game's player-character, Lara Croft in stating that:

the game-world of *Tomb Raider* is constructed in 'Lara Units', gaps between platforms are either standing jump or running jump distances, or otherwise impassable. To put it another way, the game-world of *Tomb Raider* is designed so as to offer affordances that fit the locomotive abilities of Lara Croft and resultantly provides a spatiality meaningful game-world that highlights Gibson's sense of an affordance as a relationship which is 'equally a fact of the environment and a fact of behaviour[.]'(p. 2).

It would be entirely possible to replace *Tomb Raider* and Lara Croft with *Mirror's Edge* and Faith Connors. Even though the game appears to visually offer the player an expansive universe to play in, it is realistically defined by the navigational moves designed into Faith (run, jump, slide, roll, etc.). Through trial and error, often through an onslaught of deadly falls into the darkness between two buildings, the player learns to recalculate the distance between two buildings in 'Faith Units', the distance being that which Faith can

successfully cross. Over time, the player is able to visually recognize a 'Faith Unit' between buildings, reducing the amount of risks they may take when attempting to plot out a potential path. Ultimately, the player-character becomes a measured unit of space (or distance), instead of a 'character' within the narrative gameworld.

While technically no two 'objects' in the game world can occupy the same physical space, there are often visual glitches that proposes a problem for the player in learning how to manipulate the player-character's body successfully. At times, it is a challenge to align Faith's body to an object she must physically interact with. The first time I was confronted with this lack of visual synchronicity was when I had to navigate Faith across a tightrope. In order to do so, I had to align Faith's feet with the rope and move her across a rope. Without being able to see Faith's feet, this becomes a difficult task. After several attempts, I managed to get Faith on the rope, but visually, the image of her body and where one would expect her to have to stand to successfully cross the rope didn't quite line up. If this was a physical task in the material world, it would be easy to simply align my body to the rope through physical touch between my foot and the rope. Proper positioning could quite conceivably occur without any visual cues. But since videogame play is inherently a visual experience, I had to abandon physical knowledge of space for a purely visual perception of it. As the expectation of direct physical sensory is stripped away through videogame play, it could be argued that the player relearns space and materiality through the digital coding of the game and the visual representation of the player-character and game world.

Once aligned with the rope, learning to balance and cross successfully is equally as challenging. The camera rocks from side to side as Faith stretches her arms out for balance,

completely outside of the player's control. To move forward across the rope, my initial instinct was to push the left control stick forward, as I would normally do to move forward when on stable land. But each attempt to cross the rope in this method resulted in Faith's body leaning too far to one side or the other, and inevitably ended in failure. It took quite some time to realize that in order to successfully balance across the rope, I actually had to toggle the left stick back and forth, in quick yet small movements. Regardless of where her 'body' appeared to be visually, this toggle method proved successful, if a bit unrelated to the visual representation of action on the screen. However, after considering the physical association between the toggling of the controller and Faith's lightly flailing arms, it made sense that the controls were designed to mimic the body movement that one would associate with maintaining their balance as they crossed a tightrope – arms stretched out to the side, swaying slightly back and forth, struggling to keep one's balance. It is in moments such as these that the player must learn to negotiate the discrepancies between the virtual body of the player-character and their own understanding of physical space and movement through the manipulation of the controller.

As my skill increased, the button mapping of the controls felt increasingly natural, and the wiggling of the control stick made more sense as I related my movements to the swaying of the arms as I attempted to keep Faith's balance. As Klejver (2006) explains, "We may say that the player has become temporally 're-wired'; the body-subject learns to perceive and act as the avatar, directly into projected space, via the invisible hardware interface of the screen, speakers and control devices" (p. 125). But this is not an instantaneous occurrence. It comes with time and practice. Learning spatial and material

perception through an external body reconfigures the way we use and understand our own bodies in affiliation with the digital body (and space) on the screen. Through trial and error, button mapping and visual perception, *the avatar/game environment* relationship depends on the skill level of the player.

### 3.4 Mediating Technology

While much of the literature on identity and videogames focuses predominantly on in-game content and the ways in which the player interacts with it, mediating technology such as consoles, controllers, screens and even the physical location of the player is often overlooked. These external elements significantly influence the ways in which a player interacts with the videogame, leading not only to understanding of the in-game content being mediated, but also influences the relationship between player and technology that instils a potential sense of ‘merging with the machine’ in ways that are often neglected.

This was brought to the forefront of my attention as I began to delve into single-player console games. A personal computer (PC) gamer, and more specifically an avid MMOG player at heart, my lack of console experience prior to loading *Mirror's Edge* was evident in the first few hours of gameplay. From trying to find a comfortable seating position that allowed both comfort and hand (and sometimes arm) movement, to constantly having to pause the game to look at the controller to find the buttons I was required to push to make Faith run, to having to lean forward to read the text on the screen, my inexperience with the console was reflected in the disjointed, intermittent gameplay riddled with terrifying falls and reload screens. There was little opportunity for any form of immersion based on the continuity of play as, in the beginning, my concentration was focused on the

hardware and not on the content and narrative of the game itself (Ryan, 1994). But it was not simply my novice status that infringed on my gameplay. Technical aspects of mediating technologies can help or hinder gameplay depending on a range of factors. This section will focus briefly on selected interactions between myself and the mediating technology that both enabled and hindered my gameplay.

### 3.4.1 Controllers

The Xbox 360 controller is designed to fit ergonomically into the player's hand (figure 11). Consisting of fourteen distinct buttons, triggers, joysticks and a multi-directional pad in a range of shape and colors offer a gamut of basic functions.



*Figure 11: Xbox 360 Controller*

Upon first glance, the amount of buttons and functions may appear to be daunting, but almost as soon as the controller is picked up and cradled in both hands, the player's fingers fall almost naturally on all the primary buttons; thumbs on each joystick; index fingers rest comfortably on the trigger buttons – left and right respectively, while the index fingers curl under the controller with a loose grip – ready to move swiftly to the bumper buttons if necessary. For most people, the fit and size of the Xbox 360 controller feels

natural in the player's hands – waiting for gameplay. Yet, when actively in engaged gameplay, each game has its own distinct 'feel in hand' (Kirkpatrick, 2009).

The use of a controller invariably alters the gameplay experience. Ranging from the physical design to the mapping of the buttons; from a material artefact to a motion sensor system, the object that enables the player to control the action on the screen influences the level of immersion – or what some call presence (Skalski, et. al, 2010), during gameplay. In the case of *Mirror's Edge*, the game is playable on Microsoft's Xbox 360, Sony's PlayStation 3, and on Window's driven personal computers offering three different types of controllers. While my gameplay occurred on Microsoft's Xbox 360, the materiality of any of the controllers used on each of the stated platforms connects the player's physical body to the digital movements – or actions – with and within the game.

Even though the player must learn the button configuration of a specific game title, they also have to learn the particular layout of the specific controller they are using, as each console uses proprietary (and slightly different in terms of shape and ergonomic usability) controllers. Although there is a dominant configuration of button location across consoles, each controller has a different shape; the buttons, joysticks, and bumpers have a different physical feeling. This difference may appear arbitrary to the novice player, as they fumble and learn their way around the controls, but to a more expert player, even a slight deviation in layout or configuration can impact their play performance. While the controller is an external material device that controls in game action, Kirkpatrick (2009) explains that:

To play the game we have to act without thinking at this level of effective implementation. Good play is about feeling, and being able to feel what we

are supposed to be feeling is, at least partly, a function of *not* looking at or thinking about our hands. At the same time, it is powerfully determined by what we do with them (pp. 130-131).

This comes from not only learning, but internalizing the material configuration of the controller as well as understanding the correlated actions within the game during gameplay. As a novice player, the learning curve was relatively steep – not due to the game’s challenges and design, but due to my lack of internalization of the configuration of the Xbox 360 controller. Well beyond the tutorial, I found myself looking at my hands, turning the controller on its side looking for the ‘right bumper’ when trying to make a quick 180 degree turn or struggling to remember that the ‘left trigger’ was used to duck or slide. In moments of stress or anxiety instilled by enemy encounters, the lack of internalization became painfully apparent as I struggled to remember which button(s) to press to disarm the security guard (the yellow Y button, for future reference!).

For the novice player, it is in moments such as these that make it impossible to engage with the game on an intuitive level; where the mediating technology remains at the forefront of the gameplay. As most games share button configuration across genres, it is through experience and cumulative knowledge through gameplay that the player is able to develop a relative mental model of expected correlated actions (Skalski, et. al, 2010).

### **3.4.2 Screen/Image/Resolution**

Another challenge for the (novice) player is one that depends on technologically specific requirements of the game. The player is asked to watch, then replicate Celeste’s moves as described above, but text is also displayed on the screen giving the description of



controls used to complete the demonstrated move. While the game manual makes no mention of any preferred technological screen resolution specifications, if the player does not have a high definition television, the text on the screen can, at times, be too small to read – even when sitting quite close to a 32 inch television (as I did during the gameplay portion of my research). This might not seem like much of an issue, but there were many instances where the instructional image of which button I was supposed to click was so small that I had no idea what it was, and so proceeded to attempt the move by pushing every single button; each attempt resulting in a failure. With each failure came a rising level of frustration, which further pulled me away from connecting with the game. This type of technological ‘failure’, while potentially minuscule for an expert player, awakens the an awareness of the technology mediating the play experience.

It is not only the size of the screen that matters, but also the resolution. As Bracken explains in her 2005 article “Presence and Image Quality: The case of high-definition television”,

HDTV uses a 16:9 aspect ratio (widescreen) versus the current NTSC standard of 4:3. This distinction is important because, like seeing a film in the cinema, widescreen television allows the viewer to see more of the mediated environment. Dupagne and Seel assert that these changes to television form will “accentuate the psycho-physical perception of ‘telepresence’” (p.60) (p. 195).

This is to say that when viewing an image intended for HDTV at the current NTSC standard of 4:3, the player not only not seeing the whole picture, their perception of the content on the screen is also altered. What is more:

... the higher levels of immersion reported by viewers in the HD condition suggest that they were more involved in the content ... Related to immersion, the dimensions of spatial presence and the differences in the levels of reported physiological responses between the conditions (HDTV vs NTSC) suggested that audiences do feel a sensation of being in a shared mediated space...The difference in the experience of physiological responses in the HDTV condition also suggests that image quality contributes both to a sense of presence dimensions and to the physical consequences of such experiences (p. 202).

While Bracken's research focused on television viewing, her main point can be extrapolated to also consider all content that is viewed on the screen – whether it is television programming or videogames. As such, her research suggests that immersion and presence (and spatial understanding) are enhanced in the condition of HDTV viewing.

This issue is addressed more specifically in the context of videogames and HD of images and surround sound by Skalski and Whitbred in their 2010 article “Image versus Sound: A Comparison of formal feature effects on presence and video game enjoyment” as they state that “these feature should affect spatial presence, or ‘being there’ in a media environment, by presenting more vivid images and sounds that place the user more “in” the action of the game” (p. 70).

The difference in perception was evident even within the small example I gave of not being able to read the text on the screen (as it became apparent the game was designed with a higher screen resolution in mind), and so it begs the question as to what other deficiencies were experienced in my gameplay due to a lower quality screen? How much of the game-scape was I missing in any given moment, potentially hindering my ability to make comprehensive decisions as they pertained to the space and navigation of the gameworld? And finally, to what extent was I not immersed in the gameworld due to the lack of HD qualities? These questions will remain unanswered until further comparative studies are done between instances of NTSC and HDTV gameplay of the same game title under the otherwise equivalent conditions. But it must be noted that the differences and their consequences do exist.

### **3.4.3 Play Environment**

Finally, where the player is situated in the physical world has an impact on gameplay as well as influences the way the player interacts with the other mediating technologies (controller, screen, etc.). Seating conditions during console gaming ranges from chairs and couches, the floor or even standing; each body position situates the player's body in juxtaposition with the content on the screen. Proximity to the screen varies widely in console gaming that the game design cannot account for – whereas PC gaming can assume that the player will – most often – be positioned usually at a desk, within a certain range of the computer screen.

In my current gaming set-up, I have a chaise-longue positioned in front of a 32" television which is approximately 2.5 feet off the floor. This means that if reclined in the

chaise, I am forced to look up slightly in order to clearly see the content on the screen. When reclined, the set-up creates a comfortable gaming environment where I can ignore my physical body as I engage in gameplay. If I am having trouble seeing a particular sequence (or text on the screen as described in the previous section), I have to readjust my seating position and sit at the end of the chaise, which positions me approximately three and a half feet from the screen. By moving my body forward, I am altering the physical flow between my body and the game as the ideal set up is disrupted, reminding me of my physical body (and its limitations).

There is limited research on the role that physical location (and positioning) of the player affects or influences the overall play experience (with the exception of location-based gaming<sup>9</sup>). However, for most players, simple conditions such as comfort (or discomfort) can easily be attributed to successes or failures within the game. From having to shift uncomfortably on a couch in the middle of a battle, possibly causing the player to miss the cue for an attack, or the need to sit up straight and center one's attention on the task at hand, the physical location of a player has a range of effects on gameplay.

### 3.5 Thinking About Identity

While each individual interaction described throughout this chapter portrays unique moments of gameplay and addresses the external elements that contribute to it, viewed as a

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<sup>9</sup> (Location-based game) A location-based game (or location-enabled game) is one in which the gameplay somehow evolves and progresses via a player's location. Thus, location-based games almost always support some kind of localization technology, for example by using satellite positioning like GPS.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Location-based\\_game](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Location-based_game)

set of cumulative actions and contexts, these moments create the potential for different types of identity to exist or emerge during gameplay. In considering the two most common types of identity often affiliated with videogame play discussed in the previous chapter – projective and discovered identity – based on the gameplay examples above coupled with critical reflections upon completing the game, this section will briefly assess the potential and extent to which each of these identities occur. Finally, I will discuss the potential conditions for the emergence of hybrid-identity in *Mirror's Edge*.

As stated at the beginning of this chapter, I started playing the game with a strong sense of identification with Faith on a visual level. With similar physical features, I began with a sense of 'idealized' self, expecting a vicarious experience through a fictional gameworld in an idealized body. However, as gameplay progressed, I felt this sense of identification decrease. One of the more prominent reasons was due to the use of the first person perspective. Stripping away the visual cues of Faith's body during gameplay, while often said to lead to a deeper sense of immersion for some players (Taylor, 2002), for myself, it resulted in an increasing sense of disassociation as her actions became melded with my perceptions. My initial sense of identification returned only during cut-scenes and chapter ending cinematics. In this respect, while the use of first-person perspective is often useful for increasing a sense of immersion for the 'ideal' player, within the context of my play experience, it had a broader, perhaps negative, influence on the types of identity that had the potential to develop or emerge during gameplay.

### 3.5.1 Projective Identity

As we saw in the previous chapter, projective identity is when the player imbues the player-character with characteristics and values that they imagine that character to possess. This could be manifested on a representational (aesthetic), functional (levels, weapons, etc.), or conceptual (narrative) level as they develop the player-character towards what they perceive (and project) what they want that character to be. For this to occur, Gee (2003) says there has to be some "... degree of freedom (choices) in forming my virtual character and developing her through the game" ( p. 56).

As the player navigates the game-scape in *Mirror's Edge*, it becomes quickly apparent that there is little focus on the player-character beyond its role as a navigational tool set within a pre-determined narrative. Other than using Faith's body to move around in the gameworld, there is little the player can do to influence the development of the character. The game's design does not allow for the player to personalize or alter Faith in any way; shunting the ability to play her in a way that they may feel that they are contributing to her identity. Faith's character is set in stone. From her clothes to her skill set, Faith does not cumulatively earn her skills; they pre-exist the player's interaction. There is no reward system. There is no leeway within the game for the expression of individualism or projection of identity in a tangible way.

This is not to say that the player cannot imagine an extended narrative for Faith beyond that of the script and design. In the game's introduction, it is stated that Faith has been "out of commission" for some time. Although the reasons are never explained, it is used as a narrative justification for the tutorial. In this case, a player could easily construct a

back-story for Faith as they move into the game. However, this type of projection has no actual impact or influence on the gameplay or outcome.

However, Gee continues on to say that in more structured videogames like many first-person-shooters, projective identity can still exist, but in a less direct manner. For example, players will

... redo a given fight scene because they feel that they have ‘let their character down’... they feel responsible for the character. They feel responsible to and for the character. They are projecting an identity as to who the character ought to be and what the trajectory of his or her acts in the virtual world ought, at the end of the day, to look like (p. 58).

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the player’s failures can be interwoven into the pre-existing narrative. This is exemplified as I described how I felt my novice skill was not on par with Faith’s designed expertise. I knew that I was not playing her to her fullest (designed) potential. While I did not necessarily replay sequences to perfection, there was still a sense of projection.

So while *Mirror’s Edge* does not allow the player to create the player-character or even to develop her through gameplay, there are other ways, both consciously and subconsciously, that players can engage in projective identity within the game.

### **3.5.2 Discovered Identity**

While not always explicitly identified by the term ‘discovered identity’, the concept of ‘discovering’ the identity of a player-character throughout the course of gameplay is not foreign to the growing body of literature on identity and videogames. As the player-

character is always, at least to some extent, a pre-designed entity, the player not only has the opportunity to create or develop (or project) the player-character's identity through their gameplay actions, but they also have the occasion to discover the identity created by the game designers.

The player gets a glimpse of Faith's identity even before entering the game. Her face, although on an angle, peers straight into the eyes of whoever picks up the box; a quiet, yet knowing look gazing out from her eyes, almost enticing the player to the challenge. The sharp angular haircut, eye makeup, and tattoo on her arm gives an indication of her strength and danger – but not extroverted chaos. These static visual cues are at the foundation of Faith Connor's identity that the player discovers as they progress through the game.

While the player does not have control over the creation and development of skills as described in the previous section, they all already exist in her repertoire, but these skills are not overtly apparent to the player from the beginning. While the game's manual explains the fundamental movements required to navigate successfully through the obstacle-ridden world, their use depends on the player, player's skill, and the play context. While learning the potential movement combinations designed into the game may be considered a technical aspect of gameplay, it also works towards discovering elements of Faith's identity. One could extrapolate aspects of her identity from her ability to combine individual movements into complex combinations as her being a skilled, experienced, even dexterous, runner.

There are other ways that discovered identity is manifested during gameplay, including the use of preset narrative cues as can be seen in the dialogue exchanges between



Faith and Mercury, or through the cut-scenes and cinematics scattered throughout the game for example. While it is commonly asserted that gameplay is an ebb and flow of (inter)actions and re-actions between the player and the game, it is also the process in which discovered identity is uncovered. While Faith's identity is set by the game's design and narrative, it is the player who unveils her identity through their gameplay choices. When tasks and actions are performed successfully, they are rewarded with morsels of information that contributes Faith's identity. Whether these bits of information are overtly distributed through cut scenes, or discreetly dispersed through scripted body movements that occur outside the control of the player, the player discovers aspects of Faith through active gameplay and a slight attention to detail. As the player discovers Faith's identity as little as that may be, it could be asserted that they become more invested in character, even potentially leading to projective identity construction as the player feels they know the character better.

### 3.5.3 Hybrid-Identity

Emerging from the interactions involving both the player and the avatar, hybrid-identity – as defined in the previous chapter – aims to move beyond the concept of liminal identity in that it is more than simply the identity *between* the player and player-character. Hybrid-identity exists separately from either the player as active agent or the player-character as a pre-determined character (and more broadly the game environment in which the interactions with the player-character occur).

As a single-player game played in the first-person perspective, *Mirror's Edge* begins with a clearly defined player-character with little room for player-added co-creation.

While this has already been discussed in different contexts throughout this chapter, it is of significant relevance in considering the potential conditions necessary for hybrid-identity to develop. Co-creation and projective identity strengthen the bond between player and player-character (Waggoner, 2010). While such a bond would inevitably connect the player to the player-character, it would also work towards creating an entity that is bigger than the sum of its parts. This is not to say that hybrid-identity only ever emerges in play contexts where the player creates the avatar, but without some sense of co-creation, the potential is significantly reduced.

Beyond creation of character, gameplay is an equally important aspect of hybrid-identity. Actions and tasks set to develop and progress the player-character also lead to a unique identity beyond the projected and prescribed identities of the player and pre-existing player-character. This is to say that actions within the game that work towards developing the depth of a character adds to the potential for hybrid-identity to emerge. In considering the example of *Mirror's Edge*, the designed gameplay leads primarily to the development and progression of the game's narrative but not necessarily to its only playable character, Faith Connors. During any given mission, as the player travels through the rooftops and corridors of the city, they focus on the task at hand as more of a puzzle or maze than as discrete actions that will bring Faith closer to her narrative goals. In these moments of gameplay, the player may feel a kinship or even an immersive fusion of being between Faith and themselves, but it never quite reaches the depths necessary for a hybrid-identity to emerge that can recognizably stand on its own. And in the moments that it does appear to occur, they are elusive and fleeting.

### 3.6 Conclusions: Reading the Framework

It has been previously noted that hybrid-identity emerges in MMOG gameplay when each of the relationships in the framework occur with relatively similar frequency (Boudreau, 2007). The close-reading of *Mirror's Edge* based on approximately 20 hours of gameplay that makes up the body of this chapter began through the lens of the foundational framework outlined in the preceding chapter. As the analysis progressed, it became apparent that there were several elements of the framework that were more prominent than others in the process of gameplay.

As the term suggests, single-player games are a relatively solitary experience, intended to be played alone; or at least by only one person at a time. As such, the *player/player* relationship was not a functional category within this analysis, instantly diminishing the possibility for balance across framework categories originally deemed necessary for hybrid-identity to occur. While it could be argued that there are other forms of social interaction during single-player gameplay, they are not a fundamental aspect to single-player videogames.

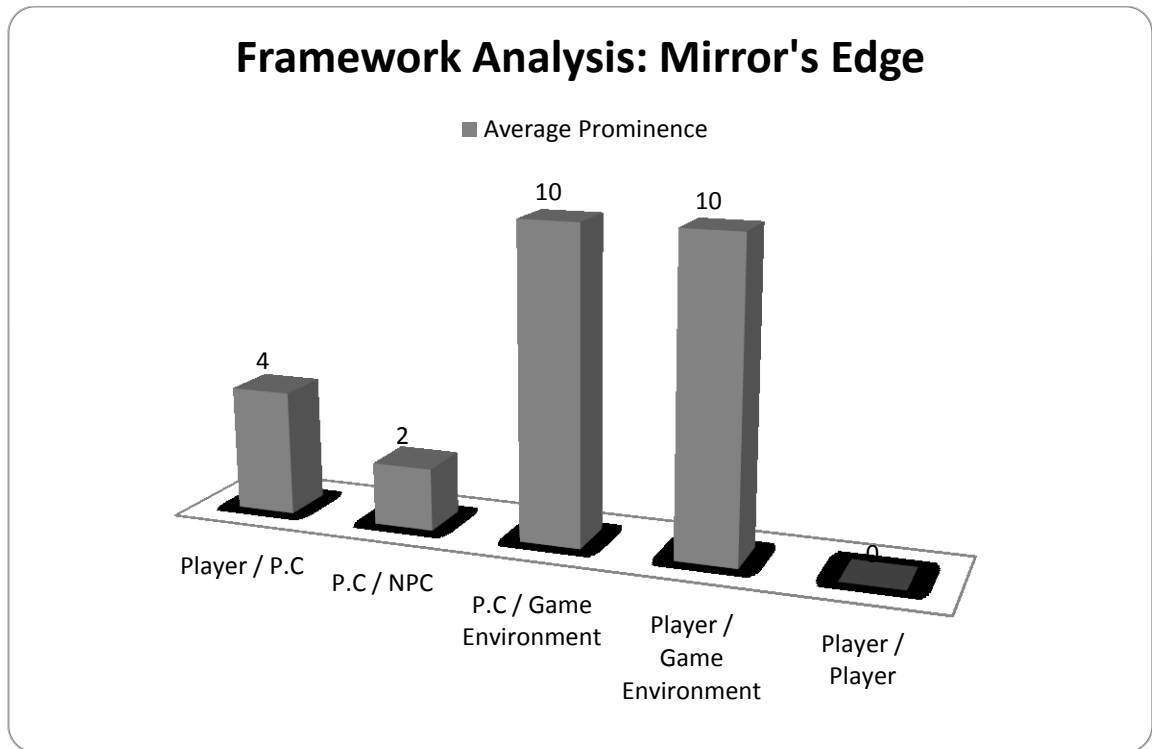
The *player-character/non-playing character* relationship, while a central aspect of MMOG gameplay as players interact with other players' in-game avatars, was the second least noticeable relationship found in my gameplay analysis of *Mirror's Edge*. However, there were avatar/avatar interactions that did occur between the player-character Faith and the game's non-playable characters (NPC's). While this is still fundamentally an avatar/avatar relationship, seeing as the NPC's are predetermined identities with a finite set of patterned interactions, the player can learn their behaviour over time, diminishing the

potential for these interactions to meaningfully contribute to the emergence of hybrid-identity.

As it has been noted repeatedly throughout this chapter, the dominant focus of gameplay in *Mirror's Edge* can be located in the *player/game environment* relationship as well as within the *player-character/game environment* relationship. Of these two, the most prominent relationship throughout gameplay is that between the player and the game environment. As play occurs in a first-person perspective, it is through the player's eyes and player-character's body that interactions with the gameworld occur, it may be tempting to view the experience as a *player/player-character* relationship. However, in this case, the "play" is not about developing a character or giving the player opportunities to explore alternate realities and consequence through gameplay choices such as ethical or moral dilemmas, or even vicarious experiences of 'Other'ness. In *Mirror's Edge*, gameplay is hyper-focused on navigating the game-scape as series of maps and mazes. With a heavier focus on the *player/game environment* relationship, there is less opportunity for hybrid-identity to emerge as the actions remain located in the player and are directly connected to the game's environment – almost excluding the player-character to some extent. As the player contemplates the game's environment, they are rarely asked to consider Faith's role in active gameplay other than as a vehicle for movement. This is not to say that the player does not feel empathy for Faith, but this is largely driven by the narrative structure and cinematic intermissions and not through interactive gameplay.

If we are to consider each individual relationship and their prominence in gameplay (figure 11) as described in chapter two, we can see that two of the five relationships

dominated gameplay, while the *player/player-character* (P.C. in the chart below) relationship was the third most frequent relationship within the game.



**Figure 12: Mirror's Edge Framework Distribution**

Although the following chapter focused on only three of these categories explicitly, all but the *player/player* element were present to some capacity. This chart is not intended to reflect actual percentages of relationship occurrences, but rather aims to give a visual representation of which element(s) were the most dominant during my play-through of *Mirror's Edge*. With this visual representation in hand, it will be possible to further evaluate different game titles and genres to compare the balance among the relationships within the framework. By using this framework analysis in conjunction with informed reflections on the types of identity that each game facilitates, it will be possible to work towards plotting out the gameplay conditions for the emergence of hybrid-identity in a

range of genres. In the case of *Mirror's Edge*, as it was seen from the previous section, hybrid-identity was fleeting if present at all. This may well be further explained in the skewed balance among the framework relationships. As such, it could be affirmed that when the framework becomes skewed in any one category, it decreases the potential for hybrid-identity to emerge or perhaps it disappears altogether.

## Chapter 4: Alone in the Dark

Over the course of one apocalyptic night you must uncover the earth-shattering secret behind Central Park. Push the frontiers of death and search ancient powers. This ultimate journey towards the menace will confront you with the ethical choice of good and evil. Your choice will reveal to you who you really are... (p. 2, *Alone in the Dark* Game Manual; Eden Games 2008).

Even before entering the game, the player is confronted with the dual nature of the word “you” so often encountered in videogame manuals. The ‘double entendre’ consciously exploited in this excerpt works to blur the lines between the player and the player-character even before they enter the gameworld. Although various levels of such blurring can be found in almost all videogames that are played through (or with) an avatar to some extent, there are unique aspects of survival horror videogames that complicate the *player/player-character* relationship, as we will see throughout this chapter. Through the use of the third-person perspective during gameplay, the very nature of survival horror instils fear and anxiety in the player, which on the one hand connects them directly to the action on the screen (Perron, 2009), while simultaneously divorces them from the body of the player-character.

Employing the framework described in chapter three to disentangle gameplay actions and interactions into meaningful categories, this chapter will look at specific elements in Eden Games’ *Alone in the Dark* (2008) that play with the boundaries of the relationship between the player and the player-character in an attempt to further understand the concept of hybrid-identity within the unique genre of survival horror. Once these

elements have been organized, it will be possible to analyze the scope to which different aspects of gameplay influence the potential for the emergence of hybrid-identity, and demonstrate aspects of the framework that should be expanded upon within the context of the survival horror genre.

The following close-reading and subsequent analysis of *Alone in the Dark* is based on the Xbox 360, Eden Games edition of the game released in 2008. It is important to note this distinction as other versions of the game – notably the PlayStation 3 version (subtitled *Inferno*) – had design alterations made to correct elements of gameplay such as clunky movement, a simplification of controls, the introduction of a new camera style and the addition of a new action sequence among other changes<sup>10</sup>, whereas the PS2 and Wii versions are a completely different game.

## 4.1 Framing the Game

The 843 Acres of Central Park are hiding a terrible secret. Built in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century by an international cartel of influential men, the park was created to provide a safe haven. It seems afterward, that it was not only for the people of New York, but for something else of a different nature entirely. Succeeding generations of guardians have protected the truth, keeping the vast parkland untouched at all costs while the most powerful and expensive city in the world reaches skyward. Now the truth can no longer be contained... (p. 2, *Alone in the Dark* Game Manual, 2008).

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.psu.com/Alone-in-the-Dark-PS3-improvements--a004621-p0.php>



The tone of the game is set within seconds of inserting the game disc, even before the player enters the gameworld. A haunting tune drifts in as the camera zooms inward from above, focusing in on a couple sitting on a park bench at night. What could be assumed at first glance to be a romantic moment is marred in horror as the camera hones in on the couple. As their faces come into full view, it is quickly realized that this is not a couple in a loving embrace, but one grasping on to each in horror. Their faces are scarred and tinged an abnormal shade of red. The man's diabolical eyes peer into the camera and out at the player. Although their faces are only in view for a few brief moments before the camera sways and pans outward again, it is chillingly obvious that something is just not right (figure 13). Before the end of the opening sequence, the camera zooms in on several seemingly disjointed locations erratically before looping back to the beginning, giving the sense that these images bear some sort of significance within the game. These few fleeting moments set up a sense of looming horror even before gameplay begins.



*Figure 13: Couple on bench in opening cinematics*

In contrast to the eerily melodic and relatively slow-paced opening sequence, if the player ignores the “press start” instruction that appears on the screen they are treated to a

Hollywood style, action packed trailer for the game. In a cinematic montage created from both cut scenes and moments of gameplay, switching between both first and third person perspectives, the player becomes a pure spectator as they watch the game's premise unfold before their eyes. From the opening close-up of Edward Carnby – the main character – as he utters “who the hell am I” to the voice-over of Edward questioning his past and his ability to make the right choices moving forward, it is clear that he is struggling to find out who he is, and what is happening around him. Combined with a seemingly eclectic selection of panoramic views of the cityscape in various states of ruin and destruction, the player is introduced to the lurking mystery and horror that awaits them beyond the “start here” button.

Set in present day New York City, the game centers around Edward Carnby's internal struggle against evil. Suffering from amnesia, Carnby has to navigate his way around the city and make his way to Central Park where he is faced with battling countless diabolical monsters as he works towards unearthing the hidden secrets of the park and avert the return of Lucifer to earth. In the process, Carnby – and by association, the player – is set on a dark adventure filled with fear, suspense, and action.

Except for the carefully crafted information blurbs quoted at the beginning of both this section and this chapter, the player is given little information concerning the plot and purpose of gameplay. The player is offered their first clue to the evils to come in the opening scene as fissures begin to appear in the ceiling as the player is forced to manoeuvre Carnby up a staircase towards his certain death. Suddenly, outside of the player's scope of vision, violent screeching sounds are heard by the NPC that was forcing Carnby to the roof,

which lead to the horrific death of his aggressor. Silence is sudden as Carnby finds himself alive and alone, and left to manoeuvre his way through the dark service hallways of the apartment block.

There is a relative sense of realism in the animation with a touch of the fantastic found in the demonic creatures. Even though the events are fictionalized, the fact that the game takes place in a ‘real world’ location, New York City’s famed Central Park, maintains a certain level of associative representation (Ash, 2009; Joliveau, 2009). Visually, the game has an apocalyptic aesthetic with dark earth tones ranging from heavy greys, browns, and deep reds (figure 14). With gameplay taking place predominantly at the night or indoors, the dark hues give way to shadows and mystery creating an omnipresent feeling of trepidation with every move.



*Figure 14: Apocalyptic aesthetic with dark earth tones*

Even when bright colors come into play, as we see in the case of fire (see figure 15), the burning flames manage to evoke the sense of an evil, sombre darkness as opposed to the bright burning ember seen on the screen.



*Figure 15: Brightly burning fire with dark undertones*

There are no difficulty levels to select from when beginning the game, only the option to enter a new or existing (saved) game. Similar to a film DVD, the game is divided into eight 30-40 minute “episodes” which are further broken down into between three and five sequences where some (but not all) of the sequences are further subdivided into checkpoints. It is possible to start gameplay at any one of these divisions regardless as to whether or not previous episodes have been completed with exception of final episode (where all previous episodes must be completed to access the eight episodes beyond the first sequence). At the time of its release, this format was relatively unique in videogames.

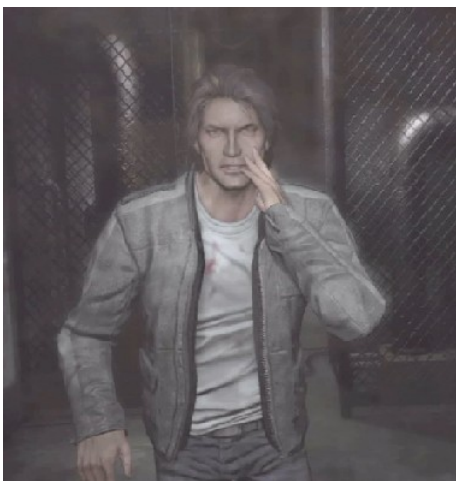
Each episode bears a title, while each sequence has a brief written summary. Again, following a filmic – or more specifically – serial television episode style, when the player opts to play an episode out of chronological order, they are given the necessary information they skipped in a recap that begins with a narrator announcing “previously, on *Alone in the Dark*”. This only occurs if the player begins the episode at the first sequence; otherwise, the player will be thrown into gameplay without any foregrounding. This feature allows the

player to skip sections they may be struggling with; however, it comes at the cost of narrative details.

While there are many positive aspects to allowing the player to enter the game at almost any given point, it also has the potential to decrease the narrative power of the game. No longer able to control the path of the player in a traditionally linear fashion, the game's strength lies not necessarily in the overall accumulation of narrative information, but rather, in its individual pockets of dramatic tension and gameplay action contained in each episode.

## 4.2 Player/Player-Character

The player enters the game through the only playable character, Edward Carnby (figure 16), who, as the player discovers, is a paranormal investigator with amnesia. Wearing a grey jacket, a dirty white t-shirt, and a pair of blue jeans for the duration of the game, Edward is a weathered looking man, the lines in his face suggesting much more life experience than his age may allude to.



*Figure 16: Playable Character Edward Carnby*

Of course, this could be attributed to the fact that he is been battling demons since 1924<sup>11</sup>. There is no room for the player to alter the player-character. Edward Carnby is a set character with pre-determined features and assigned characteristics. Instead, the player is tasked with guiding this ready-made character through the game's geographical landscape driven by the carefully plotted narrative.

As a female player bearing no physical resemblance to the player-character, the potential for any level of visual identification is extinguished. However, the game was selected not for any initial connection with the player-character, but rather to explore the extent to which these types of barriers are potentially broken down through gameplay elements that are unique to the survival horror genre, as well as investigate the ways in which a player becomes connected to a player-character through gameplay actions despite such visually referential barriers.

As mentioned in the introduction, the player is confronted with the dual nature of identity between themselves and the player-character at the very beginning of the game. After escaping his captors and surviving a sure death in the opening interactive sequences, the control is taken away from the player for a minute as Edward stumbles towards a mirror. As he stares at the reflection looking back at him, touching his face, he mutters

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<sup>11</sup> Roux-Girard (2009) explains that in the Xbox 360 version, Edward Carnby is "... the same Edward Carnby that defeated Pregtz in Derceto in 1924" (p. 163). While in a one scene during the game, when Edward is in the back of an ambulance with Sarah, the paramedic enters Edward's name in the database only to discover he is 100 years old, much to Edward's dismay.

“who the hell am I?” and in a fit of frustration, smashes the mirror with his fist<sup>12</sup>. As the shattered mirror falls to the ground, Edward just stands there, waiting for the player to reassume control.

The question – ‘who the hell am I’ – is a poignant one this early on in the game, not only as a narrative tool alluding to Edward’s amnesia, but also for the player to ponder in respect to their role with and within the game. The use of the mirror can be construed as a symbol of the duality of identity that Edward faces: who was he? And what is he now? But also the duality the player faces as an external identity interacting with the identity in the gameworld. This multiplicity of identities converges when Edward looks into the mirror and the player looks at Edward looking. The quest to unearth Edward’s memory which carries with it a part of his identity inherent in the game’s narrative is coupled with the player’s desire to not only discover this aspect of the storyline, but also to situate themselves within the game (on some level) beyond a purely navigational role.

Consequently, in this scene, the mirror can also be viewed a tool to reassert the identity of the player-character, pushing the player out of the frame of action completely. After all, the reflection in the mirror is Edward’s – not the player’s. It was not the player’s choice to look into the mirror; the game removed the control from the player to force this event to occur. While there is narrative value to the scene, by removing control from the player and forcing the focus on Edward and his reflection, the player is jolted out of the

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<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, one of the most popular survival horror games *Silent Hill 2* (Konami, 2001) begins with James, the player-character, standing at a mirror as well.

action and into the role of a spectator. In such moments of forced spectatorship, the player is faced with the duplicitous nature of their role as both a player and a player-character.

This is especially present in the survival horror genre – as the horror experienced during gameplay is contingent not only on the actions of the player, but on watching the events unfold as they happen to the player-character. In this vein, Perron (2004), states that “You’re made to adopt the protagonist’s position to follow the event and to live side by side with him the length of the action” (p. 3). This is in difference to the literature on player-avatar relationships that are based on projective or discovered identity discussed in chapter two (Gee, 2003; Trondstad, 2009; Waggoner, 2010, etc.). Instead, Perron offers the idea that the *player/player-character* relationship is not one based on embodying the player-character, but rather on sharing the experience with an external entity.

Perron articulates this position by expanding on where fear lays in survival horror videogames:

It is certainly not the avatar that is meant to be scared in a survival horror game, but rather the gamer i.e. you. If we can still refer to empathy since you experience emotions *with* an avatar, it is clear here that we cannot talk about identification with the character or about *becoming* the character in the game world (p. 6).

Instead of ‘identifying with’ or ‘becoming’ the player-character, the player is forced into a role of secondary identification as they are faced with watching (and helplessly) fearing for the safety of the avatar in moments where they do not control the actions of the player-character, while trying to navigate the player-character safely through danger when they do



control him. There are two sets of emotions at play here. There are the fiction emotions that are prescribed to the player-character by the game's design, and there are the emotions that are elicited through gameplay within the player (Perron, 2012, pp. 34-35). While in some genres, this could create a break in immersive gameplay between the player and the player-character, in the case of survival horror games, it could be argued that it reifies the bond between the two based on empathetic principles.

It is this 'helplessness' (Frome & Smuts, 2004) that can work towards connecting the player to the game, and more importantly, to the player-character by instilling a sense of forced uncertainty, enabling the player to reflect on possible consequences when forced into moments of spectatorship, in what Frome and Smuts call the "wait-and see position" (p. 19). Instead of being forced into a constant perceptual loop of action/reaction with the player-character that may diminish the capacity of the player to truly consider the consequences of their actions within the game, the player is able to contemplate their decisions as they are manifested through the forced cinematic interruptions so prevalent in survival horror games. In her 2006 chapter "Hands-on Horror", Krzywinska addresses this notion of player control (and lack thereof) as part of the pleasure of the horror experience that games share with film. She writes that this sense of control and helplessness is something that:

The games share with many horror films. This binary structure is embedded within the interactive dimension of the games. Its presence suggests that the pleasures of playing such games hinges on a dynamic experience that oscillates between doing and not doing. In each game there are periods in

which the player is in control of gameplay and at others not, creating a dynamic rhythm between self-determination and pre-determination (p. 207).

It is in the moments where control is removed from the player, in the moments of ‘pre-determination’ set forth by the game’s design that the player’s emotions emerge from the probable horror on the screen.

#### **4.2.1 Player Ability**

While not explicitly defined as such, Edward’s amnesia is also a perfect opportunity to integrate the tutorial into active gameplay. As soon as the player enters the gameworld in Episode One titled *Wake Up*, the screen is out of focus meant to convey Edward’s blurred vision. Within seconds of the game’s beginning, the player is shown an image of the Xbox 360 controller in the upper left hand corner as they are given instructions on how to look around. For the moment, the player can perform no other actions but to mimic the instructional image as they swivel the right analogue stick which controls the player’s directional vision. It is not possible at this time to move Edward.

As two enemy NPC’s, Scoff and Hammet, engage in a discussion as to what to do next, Hammet is afraid that Edward might interfere with their plans and asks Scoff: “what about him? Are you sure he’s still out?” to which Scoff replies; “one way to find out” as he approaches Edward. During this time, the scene transpires in first person perspective; the player sees through Edward’s eyes. Scoff pulls Edward into a seated position and instructs Edward to look at him while shining a small flashlight in his eyes. At this moment, there is another image of an Xbox 360 controller in the upper left hand corner demonstrating to the player how to blink. If the player clicks the right analogue stick, it makes Edward blink

which clears his vision – and therefore the screen – for a short period of time. The player is now able to watch the action in the room with intermittently clear vision – but they remain immobile, as the game engine remains in control of the scene. Scoff is then instructed to take Edward up to the roof and kill him. This is the first time that the player is able to navigate Edward.

During my first attempt at this scene, I found myself struggling to make Edward walk, by pushing the left analogue stick in the direction I wanted to go in, and blink by clicking the right analogue stick to keep the screen as clear as possible, simultaneously. The screen blurs almost as soon as Edward blinks, making it a challenge to know where you are going, even if Scoff dictates where to go. Coordinating both analogue sticks – clicking one and rotating the other, is a little like patting your head and rubbing your belly at the same time: It's possible, but it takes some practice.

If Edward does not move quickly enough, Scoff threatens him with death – and of course, through my clumsy manipulation of the controls, Edward does not even make it into the elevator the first few times I played through the opening five minutes of the game. With each failure, I was brought back to the beginning of the game, re-instructed as to how to use the controls in the same visual manner as if I had never seen the instructions before. Yet, the instructional element of the interactive tutorial fits with the opening narrative. Edward is weak, beaten, and without memory. It seems natural that Edward would not be able to do these seemingly simple tasks. Not only does the player need to be taught the simple mechanics of gameplay, Edward does as well. This narrative connection to the control mechanics allows for failure.

The entire first episode manages to weave introductory narrative material and background information while at the same time teaching the player how to play the game in relatively subtle ways. The first episode does not feel like a meaningless tutorial put in place merely to school the player in the mechanics and controls of the game. The learning curve, while a bit steep for a novice console player such as myself, the lessons never felt futile; they were always within the context of meaningful gameplay that had the power to connect player ability to the narrative development. By the time the player completes the first episode, they are equipped to continue on to the other chapters – and perhaps feel like they’ve helped Edward regain some of his memory and skill along the way.

#### **4.2.2 Player Control, Perspective & Cut-Scenes**

The game gives the player the ability to switch between first- and third-person perspective. Using third-person perspective makes it easier to navigate the game space as it offers a wider field of vision (figure 17). Alternately, first-person perspective has a narrower scope of vision (figure 18) which enables the player to perform the action as themselves; or at least as an amalgamated form of player/character. First-person perspective has other benefits as well, such as enabling the player to have a closer vantage point to the action they are performing, whether it is starting a fire, combining elements to create a weapon, or using the healing spray on a wound.



*Figure 17: Third person perspective*



*Figure 18: First person perspective*

The different perspectives can also be construed as the difference between ‘watching’ Edward’s actions on the screen as actions that are completely external to the player, and the illusion of being the one who actively performs the actions in the first-person perspective, even though the player is in control of Edward’s actions in both views. While the player has the option to choose which perspective they want to play in at times, the game mechanics have the ultimate control. In many cases throughout the game, if the player is in first-person perspective, the camera position will change automatically. For instance, when picking up an object, the camera will shift from first- to third-person, forcing the player to both navigate and observe the player-character as something (or someone) distinctly outside themselves. This enables the player to both observe the player-character, but also to understand the spatial relationship between Edward’s physical body and the object in which he is interacting with. Essentially, the automated shift in player perspective presents the player with an “... embodied representation within the context of the game” (Taylor, 2002, p. 28).

Although it could be understood that the shift from ‘first-person’ to ‘third-person’ perspective removes the player further away from the action, Taylor argues that:

In third-person point-of-view games, the player is given an embodied representation in the space with all that an embodied representation entails, including the physical relationship of the character to the space and objects around the character and a contextualized presence in the game space so that the player can experience the space through the player-character as other than simply a geometric construction. Ironically, then, third-person point-of-view affords the player an experience of embodied space that is more complex and closer to the corresponding encounter with the extra-gaming world than does first-person point-of-view (p. 28).

Indeed, there are many instances strewn throughout the game where the shift from first to third person perspective enhances the player experience as oppose to hindering it as one may expect it to. In the instance of picking up an object, learning the spatial specificities designed into the game is easier done through third person perspective since learning the object's physical distance is based on the player-character, and not the player's body (Ash, 2009). In the many situations where you must start a fire in order to illuminate your way or burn the body of an enemy (for finality), having the camera shift to third person allows a broader field of vision, while not necessarily natural to the first-person view, it enables the player to make more educated decisions in regards to gameplay. But more than being a more practical tool in regards to *player/player-character* navigation, it is also a narrative tool common to the genre.

As Perron (2009) iterates in his chapter "The Survival Horror: The extended body genre", "... the player characters of survival horror remain the matter of/for the action" (p.

132). In a narrative sense, by shifting the perspective from first person – as if the action is performed by the player – to third person, it forces the player to watch the action as it is performed by the player-character. As such, it is possible for the narrative to be driven from the perspective of Edward Carnby's story, and not necessarily through the gameplay experience of the player.

Point-of-view and camera perspectives are also tightly linked to cut-scenes and cinematics. There are two types of cinematics that occur throughout the game; during active gameplay where the player suddenly loses control of the player-character, and the more traditional cut-scene that occurs at the beginning and end of each episode. Both are used for narrative advancement (Howells, 2002) but occur at different times, and have a different effect on the *player/player-character* relationship. Both share the same animated aesthetic which aids in the continuity of player immersion with the player-character despite the lack of player control.

The in-game moments of interrupted gameplay are often relatively short and act as a tool to add information to the narrative in a way that reasserts the importance of the narrative over gameplay. Control can be taken away from the player at any given moment and regained just as quickly. At times, it takes a few moments for the player to realize that they have regained control of the player-character. The first such instance occurs in the opening sequence, as described in previous section on framing the game, when Edward is being led by an enemy towards the roof of the apartment block. After the fissures open in the ceiling, the camera pans towards the ceiling, finally resting awkwardly on the corner of the hallway, implying that Edward has fallen, and for a few moments, is paralyzed –

perhaps with fear – as the player hears the shrill screams of the enemy NPC as he is presumably attacked. The game disables the player’s ability to control Edward, and the camera, forcing the player to wait – and imagine the scene as it unfolds. After this brief scene, I was not immediately aware that I had regained control of Edward. It took a moment for me to process what I had just heard, and wondered if it was intended as a warning sign to be careful as I navigated Edward down the eerily silent hallway alone. What makes this type of cut-scene unique to the survival horror genre is not that it simply transmitted information (a warning of danger) common to almost all cut-scenes, but it also built fear and anticipation – emotions integral to the survival horror experience.

Of course, this is only the first instant of many moments where control is removed from the player in order for the game to make a narrative or atmospheric interjection. As the game progresses, there are hundreds these of short, informative interruptions of gameplay – but never so long as to completely remove the player from the action. This type of cut-scene, or in-game narrative mechanic, allows the player to feel as though they are still in control to some extent (Cheng, 2007), instead of completely removing them from the action as often occurs in full animated cut-scenes found at the beginning and end of an episode. However, being removed from the action does not necessarily mean being a passive spectator. As Cheng iterates in his paper “Waiting for Something to Happen: Narratives, interactivity and agency and the video game cut-scene”, these cinematic moments of gameplay interruption enables the player time to negotiate the ludic and narrative elements in “...a kind of transmedia mental processing that occurs wherein the player switches between the physical interaction of gameplay and the decoding



mechanisms required of cinema” (p. 19) and that “ ... in the transition between gameplay and cut-scene, between the ergodic and narrative, that there are still a complex series of interactions between the player and the game” (p. 20). This is an important aspect to keep in mind since, although the player has lost control of the player-character in these moments of in-game cinematics, they remain actively engaged with the content on the screen. This engagement allows the player to gain more narrative knowledge as well as to remain connected with the player-character as they anticipate being thrown back into the action.

Since *Alone in the Dark* is divided into individual episodes playable in any sequence, the use of cut-scenes for the purpose of re-telling information from the previous episode (that the player may or may not have played) is an important aspect to gameplay. But more than simply a tool for re-framing information a player may have missed or forgotten, they also serve to give the player information necessary for upcoming gameplay. In his article, “In Defence of Cutscenes” (2006), Klejver succinctly describes the purpose of longer cut scenes:

The cutscene may indeed be a narrative of re-telling ... but more importantly: It is a narrative of pre-telling, paving the way for the mimetic event, making it a part of a narrative act, which does not take place after, but before the event. The cutscene casts its meanings forward, strengthening the diegetic, rhetorical dimension of the event to come (§ 44).

The cut-scenes that bookend the episodes, being longer than in-game cinematics, frequently gives the player a copious amount of information to be remembered and deconstructed during gameplay. At times, information divulged in these cut-scenes appear cryptic and

only make sense as play continues. It also acts as a referential anchor when the player comes across an object, character, or event that was previously highlighted in the cut-scene.

### **4.3 Player/Game Environment**

While it goes without saying that the player navigates the gameworld through the eyes and body of the player-character, Edward, there are aspects of gameplay that have a direct link to the player, making the player-character simply a conduit of action. Perception, visual aspects and sounds are game elements that communicate information to the player directly. While the information may pass through the avatar, the content is meant to facilitate gameplay for the player – and not, necessarily – to develop the player-character in a meaningful manner.

#### **4.3.1 Spatiality**

Learning to understand geography and spatiality in a digitally created space is a complex process that is grounded in the player's perception of material reality, but it is not solely reliant on it. While the player must learn to navigate the player-character in the digital game world, spatial understanding goes beyond the coded boundaries of the player-character's body. Although founded on representation, video games are, after all, constructed virtual worlds often using referential images of 'real world' objects. This enables the player to be able to make inferences about object behaviours that influence gameplay expectations. However, the reference to the real is more symbolic than actual, only alluding to the idea of the object, and not the object (or space) itself.

This follows Aarseth's conclusive statement in his book chapter "Allegories of Space: The question of spatiality in computer games" (2000) that "Computer games ... are allegories of space: they pretend to portray space in ever more realistic ways, but rely on their deviation from reality in order to make the illusion playable (p. 169). While the images in *Alone in the Dark* refer to actual objects and 'real' places (New York City's Central Park), the player commonly expects in-game spaces (and objects) to possess different properties (physics, etc.) that the fiction allows for. Although *Alone in the Dark* contextualizes gameplay within an existing geographical space, the player does not challenge the reality of the fissures that erupt through the ground unleashing evil monsters even if the geographical context is referential to a real place – it is part of the fiction that is acceptable within the context of a videogame.

In an attempt to move beyond the idea of representation of geographical space in videogames, in his 2009 article "Emerging Spatialities of the Screen: Video games and the reconfiguration of spatial awareness", Ash works to:

... think through an alternative spatiality of images. By theorising the spaces that images *themselves produce*, rather than the way in which space is represented in images or the spaces in which images are located ... not to think the nature and function of geographic images as simply material things with a geographical component, but to theorise the geographic function of the images themselves (p. 2105).

By proposing this shift in the way that images of geography is perceived, Ash works towards reconceptualising understanding of geography in game spaces in response to the

role of the screen and the player's body plays in understanding spatiality in videogame play as "video games ... produce interactive images in which users' bodies become an active component in the framing of what is on or off screen..." (p. 2105).

Ash situates traditional understandings of geographical images in saying that they are:

usually considered to have a referential relationship with reality ... the space of images is understood as representing the world, in that they have some kind of aesthetic similarity to the 'real', even if this referentiality is accepted to be skewed, distorted, imagined, or abstracted through various artistic technique ... (p. 2106).

Indeed, this is the case when using images of Central Park in the game, even if the depiction is distorted through the fiction of the game's narrative, the referentiality to a real place exists nonetheless. However, Ash argues that videogames add a layer of complexity to geographical images since they also refer to spaces and behaviours within the game and as such, have a geographic function specific to the game space. Not only does the version of Central Park in the game refer to an existing geographical space, through videogame play, the player learns the geography on different terms than one would in the real world.

Ash continues on to say that:

Space is constructed around the activity and engagement of the user, rather than in relation to objects which locate the body in an already given physical space. The image... is imbued with a spatiotemporalising capacity which sets up both the location and duration of user's activity (p. 2111).

This is to say that the player learns the space not only by referential characteristics such as distance but also based on the amount of time it takes to navigate the space within the gameworld. Ash uses the example of navigating from point A to point B in *Call of Duty* [4] – describing geographical markers that would normally be measured by distance, but during gameplay, “... the space of the image is traversed and determined by the bodily coordinates of the user and their relationship with the avatar on the screen” (p. 2113). Essentially, Ash argues that spatial distance in videogames is based on actions and goals rather than on the physical (or geographical) distance and is determined by a range of factors both within and external to the game (p. 2114).

There are countless moments of such spatiotemporal perception of geography throughout *Alone in the Dark*. When driving through Central Park in the eighth episode, distance travelled is perceived by how long it takes to get to your next destination. While on the map, it may not be physically very far, due to the coded physics of the car in the game, it can take a lot more time to drive to your destination than it would if Edward were to simply walk across the grass. Either way, the perception of geographic distance is not based on a form of measurement, but rather it is based on how fast Edward can walk, or how adept the player is at steering a car.

The perception of spatiality in videogames is further complicated by gameplay actions such as combat and terrain. Although a player may be able to see their destined location, the time it takes to battle enemies (and perhaps die) between the two geographical points may make the distance appear to be much greater than it actually is. It is in this vein that Ash states that “movement becomes the precondition for sensing spatiality of the level

and responding to the sensory stimulus presented” (p. 2115). Of course, it becomes a challenge in videogames where field of vision and point-of-view are often limited or outside of the player’s control.

### 4.3.2 Lighting

Lighting plays an important role in creation of atmosphere and tension in the horror genre – whether in film or videogames (Sipos, 2010; El-Nasr, Niedenthal, Knez, Almeida & Zupko, 2008) – and *Alone in the Dark* is of no exception. Interplaying between high and low-key lighting, the use of angular lighting effects to create optic illusions and dark shadows, the game offers a wide range illuminating effects that impact the player-experience in various ways. As Perron explains in his article “Signs of a Threat: The effects of warning systems in survival horror games” (2004);

Without daylight, certainty and clear vision, there is no safe moment. Terror expands on a longer duration than horror does. By plunging its gamer alone in the dark or in mist and giving him only a flashlight to light his way (and so forcing him to play alongside the imperfectly seen), *Silent Hill* and *Fatale Frame* succeed at creating the fundamentals of terror (p. 2).

*Alone in the Dark* uses limited forms of illumination as well. Early on in the game, the only way to light up the dark hallways of the apartment building is by finding a flammable object, setting it on fire and using it as a torch. The problem with this lighting solution is, following the survival horror characteristic of limiting resources to create a sense of anxiety, objects that burn, only do so for a limited amount of time, as the disintegrate into ashes. The player is forced into a situation where it becomes prudent to

light larger objects on fire (as they burn longer), or to try to make sure that there is something readily available to light on fire when the need arises. Which, as it turns out, is quite often as not only does fire illuminate Edward's darkened paths, it is the only way to finalize the death of an enemy monster.

Similar to *Silent Hill* (Konami, 1999), it is also possible to use a flashlight to light the way, but this is also a limited resource due to the relative scarcity of batteries (and a relatively short battery life). While the flashlight and fire are useful tools to illuminate what is in front of you, it can also be used to stave off enemies, as we see in the third sequence of the third episode entitled *Filthy Waters*. As Edward slinks through the sewers as he stumbles upon a city worker NPC. Keeping a safe distance around the corner, the light explodes above the worker's head. Within seconds, the floor's black goo engulfs the NPC as he curses and screams until he is dead.

It takes me a few minutes to realize that he was fine until the light went out, leading me to the assumption that the black goo can be controlled with light. However, in order to move forward, I have to find a light source to push the goo out of Edward's way in order to successfully make my way through the sewer. My first instinct was to use the flashlight kept in the inventory, but the battery life was insufficient, leading to Edward's quick death as he was consumed by the goo in the darkness. The only solution was to find a larger object to light on fire; one that would cast a wide enough light arc to control more of the deadly goo and for a longer period of time. Finding a wooden sawhorse to light on fire, I was able to make my way through the sewer without taking too much damage.

The multifunctional use of light to create tension and terror is balanced by its use for alleviating the very same tension it creates by lightening the dark (even though it also makes shadows), as well as making light sources a powerful element against enemies. This is a common trope used in the horror genre: In many (but surely not all) horror films, the terror often ends come the light of day<sup>13</sup>. Of course, if you don't want to be scared, you can always turn all the lights on in the room too.

### 4.3.3 Visual Effects & Audio

Throughout the course of the game, there are several unique visual effects that communicate different types of information to the player. The most obvious is the way in which Edward's health status is conveyed to the player. While typical to the survival horror genre, unlike many games of its time, there is no static health bar on the player's screen in which the player can refer to see how much damage they have incurred. When Edward receives damage in combat however, the screen flashes a red-ish pink to infer that some sort of damage was taken as compared to the game's normal coloring (figure 19).

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<sup>13</sup> Mainstream examples include 1984's *Nightmare on Elm Street* (Wes Craven) (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0087800/>), and 2003's *Darkness Falls* (Jonathan Liebesman) (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0282209/>)





*Figure 19: Left, red-ish pink hue representing damage incurred. Right, normal gameplay coloring*

When too much damage has been taken, Edward's heart rate slows down. This is visually represented by a heart rate type red monitor that appears in the lower left hand corner with a timer indicating how much time you have left to find a healing spray to heal your wounds.

Interacting with Edward's eyes through the controller is also necessary. Blinking is required in the very first sequence of the game, as described at the beginning of this chapter, in order for Edward to see where he is going. But the blurred vision in this scene also communicates the information that Edward is injured in some way, giving the player their first clue to what ails Edward. In order to use what is called 'spectral vision', the player must close Edward's eyes for several minutes waiting for an audio signal (chiming). Spectral vision enables the player to identify fissures in the bodies of the enemies. This is a valuable tool since the only way to completely kill an enemy is by burning them, and by locating their weak spots, this task becomes (slightly) easier.

While the changes in the screen's hue changes and health meter enables the player to monitor the player-character, the mechanics can be seen as establishing a separation between the player and the player-character. Although it is the player who is responsible for inflicting damage and healing Edward in turn, there is an aspect of 'monitoring' Edward

that demarcates his body as something that is distinctly separate from mine as the player. In contrast, the use of Edward's eyes for beneficial gameplay effects (such as the spectral vision) acts to connect the player much in the same way as giving the player control over Edward's point-of view, but taking it one step further, essentially creating an 'altered position' (Gazzard, 2009) between the player and the player-character. The eyes – so directly linked to Edward's body and to that of the player – invokes a level of control and identification that potentially breaks down the bodily barrier that exist between the two.

The use of sound is another important aspect of the game that communicates different types of information to the player, further connecting the player to both the game's environment and the player-character. These sounds can range from ambient, extra-diegetic music used to create atmosphere and to set the tone of a scene, to context specific – or “functional sounds” that are “goal- related” which emerge from actions performed within the game and serves to provide the player with “necessary information for decision-making” (Ekman & Lankoski, 2009, p. 185). Goal-related sounds can range from environmental noises that alert the player of dangers ahead, to direct audio excerpts from non-playing characters that share narrative- or task-relevant information.

Sounds that are created by the player such as the sound of footsteps when navigating the player-character down a concrete hallway, or combat sounds that emit from shooting a gun or throwing a Molotov cocktail are often referred to as *interactive* sounds (Collins, 2007). It could be argued that these types of player-created sounds act to merge the player to the action on the screen and by association, to the player-character. Regardless of any gender differences between myself as a female player, and Edward, the male

protagonist, being responsible for creating the sounds that derive from his digital body allows me to identify with the actions on the screen in a fused, or amalgamated, way.

In the very least, following Cowan & Kapralos's explains in their 2008 article "Spatial Sound for Video Games and Virtual Environments Utilizing Real-Time GPU-Based Convolution" that "Spatial sound cues can add a better sense of 'presence' or 'immersion', they can compensate for poor visual cues (graphics), lead to improved object localization and, at the very least, add a 'pleasing quality' to the simulation or game" (p. 1). Within the survival horror genre, poor visual cues are often intentional to purposely obscure the landscape, such as through the use of fog or shadows in order to instil fear and anxiety in the player. In this case, the spatial sound cues help the player navigate the game world by following (or avoiding) such cues.

#### **4.4 Player-Character/Game Environment**

*Alone in the Dark's* game design utilizes the game environment as a principal part of gameplay by allowing the player to pick up items and use them in a variety of ways. Other interactions with the game environment typically range from geographical navigation to dynamic interaction with objects and non-playing characters. The game environment can expand beyond the game world and narrative to include the loading screen, data/artefact menus, and in-game messages transmitted through various methods such as audio and textual communications. While many game studies scholars distinguish between diegetic and non-diegetic aspects of the game environment (Galloway, 2006; Llanos & Jorgenson, 2011; McMahan, 2003), both contribute to the overall gameplay experience, and ultimately

– at least to some extent – to the *player/player-character* relationship by creating a rich and often multi-dimensional gameworld.

#### 4.4.1 Items & Inventory

While all videogames oblige at least a minimal level of *player-character/game environment* interaction in order for gameplay to occur, for the time of its release, *Alone in the Dark* took the level of environmental interaction to a dynamic level, enabling the player to interact with and use many objects. In order to successfully make your way through the gameworld, it is necessary to use objects found in the game environment to either use directly (tools such as batteries, bandages, ammunition, etc.) or to combine into useful weapons such as fire bullets (made by a combining fuel and a clip of bullets). When approaching an object that can be used, an icon appears on the screen. This lets the player know what can and cannot be interacted with, saving the player time from attempting to pick up every object in the game world.

That being said, not all useable objects are in plain sight, and it is upon the player to look around. For example, when entering a vehicle, it is wise to always check the glove compartment and the passenger seat for items such as healing spray. However, there are icons that appear in front of the glove compartment to let the player know that they should look inside.

A defining attribute of survival horror games is the limited amount of inventory the player is able to accumulate and carry at any given time (Perron, 2009; Therrien, 2009). *Alone in the Dark* is of no exception, enabling the player to carry a maximum of nine items in total; five on the left side, and four on the right side of Edward's interior jacket pockets.

When the player accesses the inventory by opening Edward's coat, the camera pans down in a first person perspective, showing only his chest and the interior of his coat displaying the available items (as seen below in figure 20).



*Figure 20: Edward's limited inventory, first person perspective*

The right side of the coat is where combinable items such as flares, mosquito spray, empty bottles, etc. must be stored, whereas the left side of Edward's coat is where tool items such as weapons, ammunition, batteries for the flashlight, and other items are stored. When combining materials, the selected items appear superimposed in the middle of the screen with their assigned control buttons that the player has to push in order to manipulate the item (as seen in figure 21).



*Figure 21: Inventory combine screen*

Having the inventory screen integrated into the actual gameworld (and not in a separate, unrelated screen) keeps the player within the fiction and flow of the game. There is no breakage between the player and the player-character when sifting through the inventory. The player is (visually) aware of Edward's body, always present in the shot. It is his hands that open the coat and the camera pans back and forth mimicking Edward's head frantically swinging from side to side as he 'looks' for an item as the player cycles through the inventory.

Access is done in real time, meaning that gameplay is not paused when the player accesses the inventory. If a player is being attacked and needs to combine items to create a weapon, they risk being interrupted by the attacking enemy. While it has been argued that this feature impacts the gameplay negatively – largely due to the clumsiness of the combination controls (Roux-Girard, 2009) – accessing the inventory in real-time enhances the panic and fear caused experienced by the player as they frantically try to dig in Edward's pockets searching through limited resources.

#### **4.4.2 Player-character/Non Playing Characters**

As a narrative-driven game, *Alone in the Dark* has a limited range of NPC's, both ally and enemy, which play a meaningful role in the unfolding of gameplay and the development of the player-character. In the article "Agency and Animation: The performance of interactive game characters", Sloan (2011) contextualizes NPC's as "the equivalent to supporting roles, bit characters, or extras in the world of cinema. Minor NPCs may simply be background characters or enemies to defeat, but many NPCs are crucial to the overall game story" (p. 20). However, Sloan argues that in narrative driven video

games, there is a type of NPC, identified as “‘pivotal’—those constituting the supporting cast of a video game—are essential to the telling of a game story” (p.20). Although for a large portion of gameplay, Edward wanders through the streets and paths of the park alone, there are several key characters that fulfill this definition as they drive the story, gameplay, and the player’s desire to continue playing the game. As a character with amnesia<sup>14</sup>, Edward must rely on those around him to help him uncover his identity, as much as the player must rely on the supporting NPC’s to help them (both) answer the game’s driving question: “who the hell am I”?

The main antagonist, Crowley – who stole a mystical stone from Edward and released Lucifer – is Edward’s fundamental reason for being in the predicament that he is in. He is the antagonist of the story in the truest sense of the word in that his threat of ending humanity as we know it antagonizes Edward throughout the game through taunting phone calls and multiple meetings until his demise, at the hands of Edward, in the final minutes of the game.

One of the first friendly NPC’s that the player is introduced to is Theophile Paddington. In the opening sequence, he is also held hostage along with Edward by two enemy NPC’s, Scoff and Hammet. In the beginning, the relationship between Theo and Edward is vague and shrouded in mystery. But it becomes clear that Theo holds a key to Edward’s past, a past that Edward yearns to unlock. Early on, Theo explains parts of the

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<sup>14</sup> Ernest Adams discusses the use of amnesia as a design tool in his 1999 article “The Designer's Notebook:

Three Problems for Interactive Storytellers” available online at

[http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/3414/the\\_designers\\_notebook\\_three\\_.php](http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/3414/the_designers_notebook_three_.php)

Edward's past to him, his relationship to the stone that was taken from him by Crowley – the game's main antagonist. At the beginning of the third episode, he explains that with this stone, Lucifer was released. The only way to stop Crowley (and Lucifer) from bringing the world to its end is to "follow the path of light". Without the strength to carry on, Theo gives Edward the stone and then commits suicide. From this point forward, information learned from Theo about Edward's past is done so through visits from Theo's ghost in cut-scenes and excerpts of Theo's diary, which Sarah emails to Edward throughout the game. The mysterious past between Theo gives Edward a history and depth to an otherwise aloof character. He could be conceived as a sort of father figure for Edward. Even though technically, Edward was older than Theo, the information that he carries with him allows Edward to (re)discover who he is.

The second (or perhaps most) important NPC we encounter is Sarah Flores, an artist and an art dealer who Edward meets while searching for an exit of the corrupted building in the first episode. Although characterized as an independent, resilient individual, there are many instances throughout the game where she is hesitant to follow Edward into areas of danger, and her dialogue is, at times, repetitive, as she tells Edward "I'm not following you in there". By the same token, she often commiserates with Edward about feeling alone in the world – and reassuring him numerous times that "we are in this together".

She is there to keep an eye on Edward – to care for him and to remind him to take care of himself and his wounds. This is exemplified at the end of the fourth sequence of the third episode. Convincing him to meet her at the ambulance, Edward is asked his full name so that Dr. Hartford (a minor character) can pull up his medical records. It is in this moment



that Edward learns that he is a hundred years old. As the cut-scene ends with Edward in the foreground, visibly shaken, if the player takes a moment to exam the scene, Sarah is in the background looking concerned for him, hand outreached as he walks away (figure 22).



*Figure 22: Edward discovers his identity; Sarah looks concerned*

She is there not only to help with uncovering his past, but also to give him moral and emotional support as well.

As a support character, Sarah gives Edward a sense of compassion – a desire to ‘keep going’ despite the hardships and the horror. This compassion reciprocated just over midway through the game (episode 5, sequence 1), when Sarah is trapped in a cocoon, and Edward must save her. Although saving her is part of the scripted gameplay in this particular sequence, it works not only to demonstrate a strengthened bond between Edward and Sarah as characters within the narrative, it creates a moment of empathy for the player, as the player must figure out how to resuscitate her. Through the act of saving her, the player potentially feels more connected to her and the relationship that is crafted between Edward and Sarah.

It could be said that the relationship developed between the Edward and Sarah is based on the concept of ‘ethical care’. As explained by Murphy and Zagal in their 2011 article “Videogames and the Ethics of Care”;

The ethics of care differ from traditional moral theory in that there is a greater focus on personal, partial, and emotional experience. At the heart of the ethics of care is the assertion that rational thought and decision-making is not the only valid moral motivation. Subjective factors, especially the value placed in specific interpersonal relationships, are considered to be valid motivators for moral decisions and behavior (p. 71).

In the last moments of the game, after the stones have been combined, Lucifer begins to take over Edward’s body. However, Sarah tries to prevent this by grabbing the stone. It is at this moment that the player is faced with an ethical dilemma: shoot Sarah to prevent her from being possessed, which leads to Edward being taken over by Lucifer, but ultimately loses Sarah. Or, do nothing and allow her to be taken over, which results in Edward and Sarah embracing before she is completely overtaken and then walking away and being alone.

For the player, this decision is not founded on an ethical decision based on the choice between good and evil. There are no other cues throughout the game that lead the player down the path of light or the path of darkness. Instead, this decision is based on the relationship the player perceives Edward to have with Sarah, as well as how the player perceives Edward. Following Murphy and Zagal’s:

People often make moral decisions based on their relationships and emotional connections rather than on utilitarian calculations or Kantian moral rules. While they may not play a dominant role, these emotional and relationship-based influences are at least a factor in ethical thinking and decision-making (2011, p. 78).

It is clear that, after playing the game alongside Sarah, such factors in this final decision are surely influenced by the relationship between Edward, Sarah, and the player. Ultimately, the scripted ending summarizes good and evil by assigning Edward's choice to kill Sarah as his choice to follow the path of darkness – the last human act is murder; and if he opts to walk away, leaving Sarah possessed, he has chosen the path of light – losing her, but saving humanity. Either way, Edward remains alone ... in the dark.

## 4.5 Mediating Technology

Mediating technologies such as screens, speakers, and controllers occupy a significant role in contributing to the overall player experience. They also play a large part in creating the atmosphere, fear and suspense that characterizes the survival horror genre. Indeed, in its very title, *Alone in the Dark* implies the context in which it should be played. The following section will discuss specific elements from a variety of mediating technologies and consider their influence on the potential for the emergence of hybrid-identity through various gameplay situations.

### 4.5.1 Screen/Image/Sound

“The screen remains an important layer as it is mainly through the screen that the game worlds can unfold and become accessible to today’s player” (Nitsche 2008, p. 3). Indeed, as a primarily visual medium, the role of the screen in facilitating console videogame play between the player, the player-character, and the gameworld is one of the most prominent. The materiality of the screen alters the gameplay experience on many levels; from possibly obscuring necessary visual details if a screen is too small or if the aspect ratio is too low, to having the potential to enable a sense of immersion as large, high-definition screens encompass the player’s full scope of vision during play.

The primary bulk of my gameplay occurred on a 27 inch CRT television (approximately 24 of the 30 hours of gameplay), while the remaining six hours were played on a 32inch high-definition television (HD). While at first, any difference appeared to be minimal – unlike most recent titles, *Alone in the Dark* is not designed exclusively to be played on a high-definition television. While the extra inches of screen space allowed me to see objects and paths a little more clearly, or in the very least, they were displayed larger, the visual quality did not influence my skill set or ability to play the game in either a negative or positive way.

Loading the game disc for the first time on a very sunny day, the title *Alone in the Dark* lost some of its intended impact. Drawing the curtains to create the intended atmosphere only goes so far in the realm of horror. It is common knowledge that if you want to be less scared; you watch a horror film during daylight (or in the very least, with all the lights on). The same can be said about the playing of a survival horror game.

One welcome technical feature of any television is the option to adjust the brightness of the screen even before entering the game. Within moments of loading the disc, the player is instructed to dim the television's brightness until they can barely see the three symbols displayed on the screen. While in many games, brightness, sharpness, and clarity of image are considered optimal specifications, in a survival horror game, darkness and muted images become the ideal; not necessarily for gameplay, but for creating the desired atmospheric effect. As Niedenthal explains in his chapter "Patterns of Obscurity: Gothic setting and light in Resident Evil 4 and Silent Hill 2" (2008); "Dark environments are a cliché within the horror genre. Therefore, it is important to reiterate that darkness is only one means of creating the obscurity that lends itself to the sublime terror of the survival horror genre" (p. 176). Of course, there is no way for the game to distinguish whether or not the player has chosen to select the optimal dimness or to 'cheat' and keep the screen as bright as possible. While this might go against the intended atmosphere of the game's design, it does have its benefits in seeing details that might help the player navigate and make gameplay decisions.

The entire game takes place over the course of one night – keeping with the concept of the horrors that lurk in the dark. But when it comes to being able to see where one is going, there are many instances when it almost seems necessary to forfeit atmosphere and the opt for visual enhancement by turning up the brightness. For example, in the beginning of the second sequence of the sixth episode, the player must navigate their way by walking and driving a forklift through an old, dark building. In my first play-through of this scene, I had the darkness set to the optimal setting (as determined by the calibration task at the

beginning of the game described above). While the game is well lit in many areas – walking through central park, there are functioning park lamps lining the paths; many hallways are sufficiently illuminated – there are also very dark areas. The darkness can make it difficult to see where you are aiming your gun. On my second play-through of the same sequence, I opted to brighten the television past the “optimal settings” so that I would have a better idea of my surroundings (figure 23).



*Figure 23: Left darkness. Right, adjusted brightness*

The brightened screen lost some of its ambient darkness and image sharpness, enhancing my ability to scope out my surroundings for potential enemies easier. By making the environment less visually challenging, fear of my environment lessened as well. Unfortunately, visual efficiency comes at the cost of atmosphere and effect in this case.

Another essential element in survival horror videogames is the use of sound. As previously mentioned, the technical purposes include communicating information to the player in the form of audio cues (floors creaking, screams in the distance, etc.) to extra-diegetic ambient music aimed to create tension and atmosphere for the player. While the existence of these sounds is paramount to the gameplay experience, the mediating technologies that emit them deserve equal consideration.

Regardless of the complexity and integrity of the sounds designed into the game, the quality of the output device carries a significant amount of weight in the player experience. For the most part, my auditory experience derived from the integrated speakers<sup>15</sup> on my ten year old CRT television set. The sound quality is perfectly acceptable; however, it is no comparison to a state of the art sound-surround stereo system. Even though the game boasts many sounds, when not in contact with an enemy or watching a cut-scene, a large portion of the gameplay occurs in silence, with only ambient environmental sounds – footsteps, the sound the engine of whatever vehicle Edward is driving, the sound of a door opening – only punctuated by a musical score when danger is anticipated. As such, integrated speakers suffice.

For a more intimate experience, the use headphones create a deeper, more immersive – and essentially creepier – experience. During the course of my gameplay, I used two sets of headphones of two different qualities. The first set, a pair of Sony headphones, which boast ‘movie quality sound with the MDR-XD200 headphones. They feature 40mm driver unit for deep bass audio and comfortable urethane leather ear pads’<sup>16</sup>. While a perfectly acceptable set of headphones for general audio use, they are not specifically designed for videogame play. Even boasting ‘comfortable urethane leather ear pads’, they were far from noise-cancelling, thus making external sounds audible during

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<sup>15</sup> According to the manual specifications, the television features the VIVA/BBE 3D High Definition Sound System with 2 speakers delivering 7.5 watts stereo sound.

<sup>16</sup> Sony “Stereo Headphones” MDR-XD200 -

<http://store.sony.com/webapp/wcs/stores/servlet/ProductDisplay?catalogId=10551&storeId=10151&langId=-1&partNumber=MDRXd200>

gameplay. Finally, although the headphones offer a '40mm driver unit for deep bass audio', there is no adjustable equalizer to compensate for the unique properties of a survival horror game. As the game shifted between low ambient sounds to shrill combat noises, I was constantly adjusting the volume on the television, causing a stoppage in gameplay each time. This was never a problem when using the integrated speakers on the television, even if the quality of the sound was not as pronounced.

Finally, I purchased a set of headphones designed specifically for videogame play, and even more specifically for use on the Xbox 360. While not the top of the product line by any means, the Turtle Beach X12 'gaming headset and amplified stereo sound'<sup>17</sup> system provided an added richness to the game sounds. As the company's headset boasts:

With the X12, you can hear sound cues that are missed with conventional TV speakers, such as the sound of enemy footsteps or the click of a loading weapon in the distance. That means you'll react faster and take them out before they can take you out, giving you the edge that can make the difference between winning and losing (2012, Overview; by Voyetra Turtle Beach, Inc.).

The auditory experience was indeed superior to both the Sony Headphones and the integrated television speakers. Anticipation, anxiety, and tension were heightened due to the quality of the sounds funnelled directly into my ears. Suddenly, every sound that was previously muted was amplified causing me to be more cautious in proceeding through the deserted paths of Central Park. The technology enhanced the gameplay experience to the

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<sup>17</sup> <http://www.turtlebeach.com/products/Xbox-gaming-headsets/ear-force-x12.aspx>



point of enabling me to become better at reacting to in-game triggers otherwise missed when not using headphones at all. This auditory improvement can mean the difference between life and death (of the player-character), as such it has the possibility to keep the player engaged with the game without interruption, potentially deepening the *player/player-character* relationship.

#### 4.5.2 Controller

One of the most common criticisms about the Xbox 360 version of *Alone in the Dark* is that the controls are clumsy and unintuitive (Roux-Girard, 2009; Waters, 2008). Even with a lot of practice, it is often a challenge to navigate the player-character with any sense of expertise even for the most adept gamer. This is unfortunate, because as Murphy explains in her article “Live in Your World, Play in Ours: The Spaces of video game identity” (2004),

Control within a game and the controllers used to play a game are actually quite crucial factors in facilitating a player’s identification with an avatar and establishing a connection between the physical body of the gamer in front of the television or computer screen and one’s identity within the narrative world of a game. The input devices in contemporary video game systems have controls mapped to perform a range of different functions and are designed so that they ergonomically fit within a player’s hands (p. 230).

In the case of *Alone in the Dark*, even though the controller may fit in the player’s hand ergonomically, the inability to intuitively manipulate the controls acts to remind the player

of the controller in their hand as opposed to allowing it to seamlessly merge with the player's body.

Being consciously reminded of the materiality of the controller also interferes with the sense of 'being' the player-character. Instead of feeling connected to Edward by witnessing his movement commanded through the player's manipulation of the controller – or what Gregersen and Grodal define as “p-actions” in their 2009 chapter “Embodiment and Interface” (p. 70), there is a severing of controlled engagement between the controls, the player's intent, and the actions of the player-character.

## 4.6 Thinking about Identity

While each section within this chapter depicts unique moments of gameplay and articulates selected aspects of mediating technologies and their influence on the play experience, when viewed as a set of cumulative actions and contexts, they generate opportunities for different types of identities to emerge. The relationship between the player and the player-character in survival horror videogames is unique in that although the player is responsible for the facilitating the action on the screen (Newman, 2002), due to the spectatorial nature of the horror genre (Frome & Smuts, 2004; Perron, 2009), there is a natural (and necessary) detachment between the player and the player-character.

Based on the gameplay excerpts outlined throughout this chapter coupled with critical reflections after the game's completion, the following section will consider the potential for, and extent to which, the two types of identity commonly affiliated with videogame play – projective and discovered identity – exist. I will then discuss any possible conditions present in *Alone in the Dark* that is conducive to the emergence of hybrid-

identity. Finally, I will reassess the existing framework to determine its value as an analytical tool for survival horror games, and make any adjustments to the framework accordingly.

#### 4.6.1 Projective Identity

Projective identity as described in chapter two is generally an identity that a player *projects* (or imposes) onto the player-character (Gee, 2003). According to Gee, this type of identity is based on the double entendre of the word ‘project’ as he clarifies each meaning as “to project one’s values and desires onto the virtual character” and “seeing the virtual character as one’s own project in the making ... imbue[d] with a certain trajectory through time by my [the player’s] aspirations for what I [they] want that character to be and become” (p. 55).

In a single-player game that is relatively highly structured such as *Alone in the Dark*, the player often has little room impose their values or desires onto Edward, and even less opportunity to imbue an alternate trajectory for him other than the pre-scripted one embedded into the very linear gameplay. Gee’s two definitions can be expanded to include what the player thinks the player-character *should* do in the context of the narrative structure, and more commonly, what the player *would do if they were* the player-character themselves.

A precursor to projective identity, traditional symbolic interactionism accounts for the reciprocal nature of identity development (Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934) in a dyadic ‘act/react’ process. Identity is developed and maintained through a social feedback loop between the individual and that which they are interacting with. For example, when in a

conversation with their boss, a person will listen to what their boss has to say, internalize it, and react in a way that responds to the initial interaction. The individual's personal identity becomes influenced by how the individual believes the boss perceives them. This is not to say that the individual acts in a false or fake manner, but rather, they actively react to other person's expectation of who others think they are. This continues for as long as the interaction occurs. Over time, these interpersonal interactions accumulate and are responsible for changes in individual identity.

Similarly, it could be argued that videogame play occurs along the same guiding principles, but with a few more wrinkles. A player enters a game with a relatively set (or 'real') identity in place (Gee, 2003), but through interactions with the game, the player is faced with reacting to the game, not only in ways they *want* to, but in ways that are *expected* of them. The game then in turn reacts to the player's response. Although the game is a fixed entity with a finite amount of responses, the game works to alter the way the player reacts to the game over time and experience. In this way, the game develops the player into an ideal player, often leading to expertise (Aarseth, 2007).

Also, unlike traditional face to face social interactions, there is the added dimension of the player-character. In the case of a narratively-driven, scripted videogame, the added identity changes the dynamic of conventional identity development. Edward Carnby exists in all his potentiality prior to the player ever loading the game. There is no (or very little) room for the player to change or alter his identity in any way. It is the player, essentially, that must negotiate *their* values and expectations in order to continue on with the game. It is the game (and Edward Carnby) that impose *their* desires onto the player. When faced with

an ethical decision as the player is asked to at the end of the game – whether to kill or spare Sarah after she is possessed by Lucifer; whether to follow the path of light or darkness – it is the player that is asked to negotiate their own perspective. Do they respond to the challenge as their ‘real’ selves? What would they – the player – do in this case? Or does the player assume Edward’s identity and ask themselves what would Edward do in this case? Or some hybrid version of the player and Edward?

#### 4.6.2 Discovered Identity

In their 2000 article “Beyond ‘Identity’”, Brubaker and Cooper delineate common understandings of the concept of identity and specifically, discovered identity as “... something people (or groups) can have without being aware of it. In this perspective, identity is something to be *discovered*, and something about which can be *mistaken*” (p. 10). This idea can be equally transferred to videogame play where the player-character is pre-determined. The player enters the gameworld through another identity; that of the player-character, and more specifically Edward Carnby, with very little knowledge of who he is<sup>18</sup>.

Indeed, part of the joy of playing any character-driven videogame is the unearthing of the identity of the player-character through active gameplay. In *Alone in the Dark*, there is the added element of playing a character that has amnesia, so there is an increased sense of ‘discovery’ as the game unfolds. Finding out “who the hell am I” becomes a shared quest between the player and Edward. Receiving Sarah’s messages containing excerpts from

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<sup>18</sup> This is assuming that the player has not done any previous research online about the game, or if they are not familiar with the other titles in the franchise.

Theo's diary helps give depth to the game's narrative, but it also helps the player uncover Edward's identity for both of them. The moment Edward discovers that he is a hundred years old, he is shocked and perhaps even a little dismayed before anger visibly settles in and the sequence ends, leaving the player alone to contemplate the information they have just discovered.

The emotions that Edward expresses (and that are displayed in the cut-scene for the player to see) are shared by the player, who is (most probably) equally shocked to learn this news. After all, it would be surreal to find out that you are a hundred years old, made even more unbelievable by the fact that you look like you are still in your thirties. The idea of discovered identity is dualistic here as the discovery is experienced at the same time by both Edward and the player. This simultaneous discovery has the potential to connect the player and the player-character in a way that is not often utilized in narrative, single-player videogames.

Of course, following Brubaker and Cooper's definition quoted above, this discovery can also be mistaken. This is where the player and player-character have the potential to become disconnected again. For example, while Sarah and Edward appear to have a connection throughout the game, it is never implicitly iterated that she is his love interest. This is something that is never 'discovered' through gameplay and had I done so, would have been a mistaken discover. It is not part of Edward's (explicit) identity. However as a player eliciting a bit of authorial agency, I imposed just such judgement on their relationship through my own desire to add that particular dimension to the story that it only (slightly) alludes to.

Conversely, unless a scripted twist in the narrative occurs, there is no “mistaken” discovery in regards to his own identity on Edward’s part. There is no way that my gameplay actions can make Edward believe something that he is not. The only identity that can be ‘discovered’ on behalf of the player-character is that which is pre-determined by the game’s narrative and design.

#### 4.6.3 Hybrid-identity

Are there opportunities in *Alone in the Dark* for hybrid-identity, an identity that is external to both the player and the player-character, to emerge? There *are* moments of fused identity, where the player and Edward share experiences simultaneously as just described, but are there moments when the interactions between the player and the player-character (in and through gameplay) create a wholly separate entity, if only for a fleeting moment?

Survival horror is a unique genre in regards to the *player/player-character* relationship. While immersion in videogame play is often associated with the doing away with (or forgetting of) the player’s body (Lahti, 2003; McMahan, 2003) the very nature of horror relies on the physiological response of the human body for effect. As Krzywinska declares in her chapter “Hands on Horror”, “Horror ... has the power to promote physical sensation” (2002, p. 207).

During videogame play, this physical response to the horror on the screen can also act to simultaneously connect and separate the player from the player-character. Even if the player is removed from any physical harm, the feeling of fear and anxiety often remain. In this sense, the player is connected to the player-character, as it is the player-character’s

actions (and the atmospheric tensions in the gameworld) that provoke the fear the player. Regardless of any actual danger, the fear felt by the player is very real. Fear, in this situation, is experienced twofold. As Perron (2004) explains in his article “Sign of a Threat: The Effects of Warning Systems in Survival Horror Games”:

... you do not fear for your own survival in a horror game either. However, in the game-world, since you merge with your avatar at the action level, and since your main goal is precisely to make him/her survive the threatening monsters, you’re indeed made to be afraid that the monsters will trap you, in other words to fear *as if* you were in danger (p. 6).

Therefore, on the one hand the fear felt by the player can be understood as being empathetic fear, but on the other hand, since it is also coupled with the fear of failure on the side of the player, the fear is amplified and multifaceted within the player, which can manifest itself physically – perhaps through quickened breath, increased heart rate and unsteady hands potentially resulting in the inability to successfully save (or navigate) the player-character to safety.

Perron takes the relationship between the player, the body and the player-character (and his body) a step further in his chapter “The Survival Horror: The extended body genre” (2009) as he works to articulate the idea that while the bodies of the player and player-character may share fear, they do not share the same mind:

If to play means to pretend to be someone else in the framework of a playful activity and to behave accordingly, it implies that the gamer forms one body – but not one mind as we’ll see – with his player character... (p. 131).



Here, Perron articulates that while the player and the player-character are connected through assuming the identity of the player-character through the act of gameplay (and the controller as he mentions further in the chapter), when it comes to experiencing fear, it resides in the mind of the player (and not in that of the player-character). There are no shots of the player-character cringing or cowering as they try to attack their enemy.

In considering the concept of hybrid-identity in the context of survival horror games, is it even possible for a third identity to exist in a genre that is so heavily focused on the body? *Alone in the Dark* evokes moments of fear in the player, but in my experience not at the level of being ‘too scared’ to continue on.

With very little fear experienced, gameplay was filled predominantly with the suspense connected to learning who Edward was and why he was destined to save humanity. Without any real input on the part of the player, beyond following the scripted (and forced) narrative path across the gameworld, the opportunities for hybrid-identity to emerge were unnoticeable. Over the course of gameplay, I never felt there was anything more than Edward Carnby, the man with amnesia desperately seeking out his identity and the path that was laid out for him by the game’s design. As a player, although I enjoyed the discovering of Edward’s identity, I did not experience anything beyond the both of us.

## 4.7 Conclusions: Reading the Framework

In an attempt to determine if there was any potential for hybrid-identity to emerge in *Alone in the Dark*, thirty hours of gameplay was analysed through the lens of the foundational framework outlined in chapter two. Original analytical categories were:

- *player/player-character* interactions

- *player-character/non-playing character* interactions
- *player/game environment* interactions
- *player-character/game environment* interactions
- *player/player* interactions

With an overarching framework which included the following categories:

- Player
- Game system
- Mediating technologies

Being a single-player videogame, there were no *player/player* interactions to account for, as such, it was not considered in the analysis. As gameplay progressed, it became increasingly difficult to isolate individual moments of gameplay into any one category explicitly. Instead of duplicating entries, the categories were collapsed and redefined to accommodate the complex nature of the gameplay interactions.

As the central interaction in *Alone in the Dark*, the *player/player-character* category remained intact. Within this category, my interactions with Edward Carnby were further broken down to include *player ability* which relates to my ability as the player to control the player-character within the gameworld. This category also includes the subsection of *player control/perspective/cut-scenes* which discusses gameplay examples related to the moments the player has control of the gameplay and when the game takes over – from cut-scenes to forced dialogue exchanges.

The *player/game environment* category arose as the second most prominent set of interactions even though it could be argued that *player/player-character* interactions occur

within the *player/game environment* category, for sake of clarity, these two elements were kept separate. This second grouping included examples demonstrating the player's understanding of spatiality and geography within the gameworld as well as lighting aspects and audio/visual effects. These three subsections influence the *player/game environment* relationship that can be considered distinctively separate from interactions with the player-character even if the player navigates the gameworld through the player-character, which is the third prominent category: *player-character/game environment* interactions.

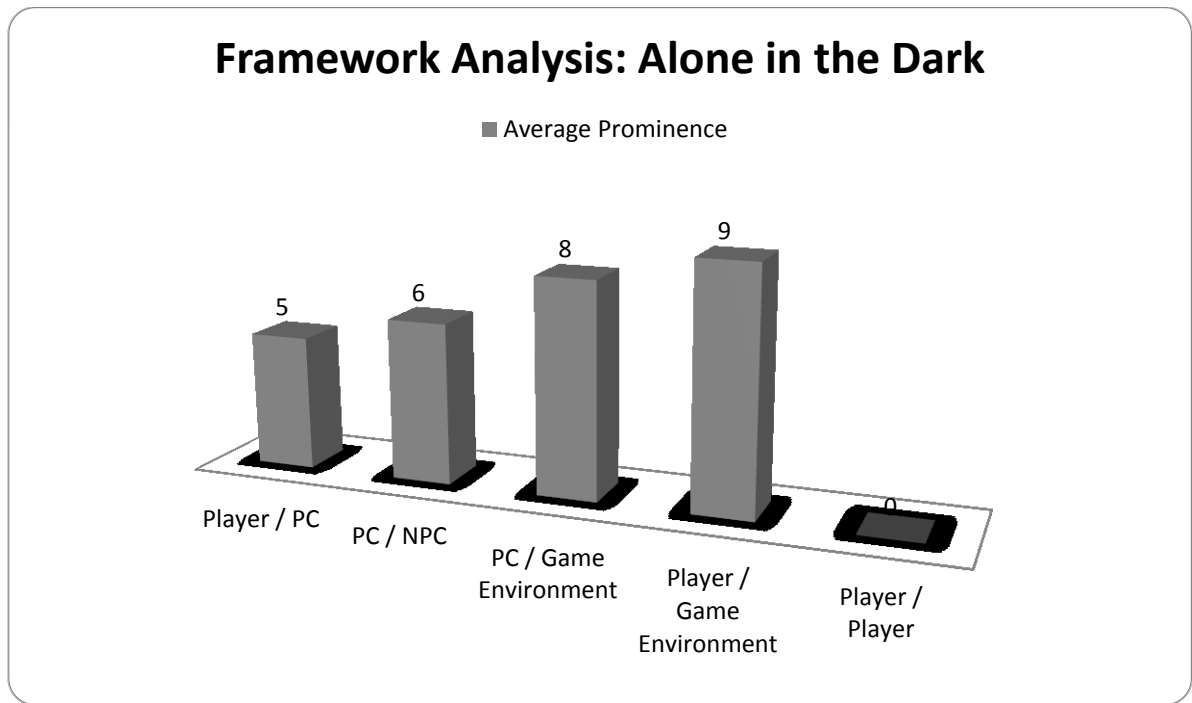
This final category includes interactions that are specific to the player-character (again, even if the actions are technically performed by the player through the controller) such as the inventory system and the *player-character/non-playing character* interactions. These two sub-categories aid in connecting the player to the player-character and the gameplay system.

In terms of the overarching framework, adjustments were made to accommodate the specific conditions of this research. The category of the player as an overarching category was not addressed since all gameplay excerpts within this chapter were drawn from my own personal experience, and any reference to 'the player' is defined by actions prescribed by the game's design and not dependent on any individual occurrence. This category is useful when performing comparative research among a variety of different players.

Finally, even though *Alone in the Dark* is available on multiple platforms, since gameplay for this chapter occurred all on one console (Xbox 360), the *game systems* category was merged with the *mediating technologies* section and included focus on *screen/image/sound* and selected aspects of the *controller*.

With these categories reconfigured to reflect the specificities of gameplay structure in *Alone in the Dark*, analysis became more coherent, making it possible to determine if the conditions necessary for hybrid-identity to emerge (or not) were present. As mentioned in the previous section, there was little- to no- notice of hybrid-identity as I made my way through the game. This leads me to conclude that the conditions were indeed not present, at least in my experience.

As iterated in the second chapter on “Frameworks and Identities”, hybrid-identity appears to emerge most often when the framework categories are in relative balance. If we are to consider each category in the framework and their prominence in gameplay (figure 24), on the scale of zero to ten described in chapter two, we can see that the player/player-character (PC in chart below) and the player-character/non-player character (PC/NPC in chart) are approximately within the same range of prominence, but remain in the lower end of the scale.



**Figure 24: Alone in the Dark Framework Distribution**

As a structured narrative, the player was responsible for uncovering the player-character's identity through interactions with the player-character and with non-playing characters. However, due to the fact that there was no ability for the player to alter the player-character, the relationship between the two remains more functional than expressive.

The second most prominent interaction occurs between the player-character and the game environment. Although the series, which saw its debut in 1992, is touted as one of the first survival horror games, in actuality, gameplay is centered on puzzle solving and combat. As such, the interactions between the player-character and the game environment play a significant role in the development of the game, and its narrative. Finally, the *player/game environment* is the most important interaction determined by the relevance to successful gameplay as well as by the impact on the player. Again, related to the puzzle-

solving aspect of the game coupled with the technical elements that create atmosphere and tension, the player is in constant consideration of the game's environment as they navigate their way through the narrative, puzzles and geography of the game.

## Chapter 5: Fable 2

Who Will You Become? Beginning as a penniless street urchin, your destiny is to become Albion's greatest Hero. But will your power lie in kindness or cruelty? Choose your own path to glory and experience how those choices change you and the world forever. A new life, a unique adventure – every time!

(*Fable II*, box sleeve)

On the back of the *Fable II* box, below the image of strapping male warrior, the leading question looms: *Who will you become?* A question clearly intended for the player, but which is inherently tied into the dual nature of identity in videogames. As a role-playing game (RPG), the player expects the ability to explore new worlds and possibly new selves. The very foundation of the genre is based on giving the player a range of choices that affect roles, narratives, and outcomes that affect identity in some way (Fine, 1983; Wolf, 2008). Without a doubt the potential for identity development is paramount to the success of role-playing games. The player knows that they will get to play a hero, but the question remains – who becomes the hero? The player? The player-character? Both?

In a game that offers the player a range of opportunities including the option to play good or evil, and anywhere in between, with hundreds of potential paths depending on the player's choices and gameplay style, the following chapter reflects only one of these possibilities by drawing on specific examples from my own play sessions. These examples will be coupled with more general gameplay mechanics inherent in the design that are common or offered to all players. Following the two previous chapters, using the

framework outlined in chapter two as a guiding lens to perform an analysis of game mechanics and player interactions that make up gameplay, the goal of this chapter is to explore the potential for the emergence of hybrid-identity in a game that favours player choice and character development within a vast, albeit structured, gameworld.

## 5.1 Framing the Game

Set in the fictional land of Albion, *Fable II* (2008, Lionhead Studios) follows the story and actions of a predestined hero in a pre-industrial land. The game begins with a very brief introductory cinematic (a mere 2:15 minutes!) that follows a sparrow as it soars through the sky, gliding over a countryside covered in snow where greys and blue dominate the color palette. Accompanied by a very epic musical overture, the sparrow speeds onward following a muddy road towards a walled city. The colors seamlessly shift to darker greys and sooty browns as the sparrow swoops towards the city. Entering the main gates, the camera drops to eye level and hovers for a moment before panning skyward focusing on the sparrow sitting atop a roof peak. Suddenly, the sparrow flies away, but not before relieving itself. In slow motion the camera focuses on the bird droppings as it falls from the sky, only to land on the head of a young child; some say this is good luck. In no act of coincidence, the child's name is Sparrow<sup>19</sup>. As the remaining 30 seconds of the opening scene unfolds, the player is introduced to Sparrow's sister, Rose and the control shifts to the player. As they dream about living in the castle way up on the hill, the children hear a magic show in

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<sup>19</sup> Depending on the sex the player chooses, the young child is either male or female but maintains the name Sparrow in both cases. I opted to play a female character and as such, when referring to Sparrow for the remainder of the chapter will also use the associated female pronouns.



the distance and the player is encouraged to follow Rose to the scene. There, they are enamoured with a magic box which they believe will solve their troubles and finally allow them to leave the streets.

The remainder of the opening sequence is interactive, drawing the player into the gameplay which also acts as a tutorial, introducing control schemes and assigning simple tasks and quests for the player to complete. Each of these tasks acts to set up a broader narrative that becomes more apparent as the game develops. From these early quests, the player is informed that they have the choice to play along the path of good or evil with each choice they make contributes to the balance one way or the other. The player also aligns their loyalties along lines of purity or corruption.

As the introductory narrative progresses, the children are summoned to the castle, in what they believe is a happy twist of fate (or magic) finally enabling them live free of poverty. Unfortunately, upon arrival they quickly find out that Lord Lucien sought them for his own quest of finding the three heroes to fulfill what is insinuated to be an evil plan. When he learns that they are none of the three he was seeking but discovers that one of the two children is a fourth hero, he shoots Rose and Sparrow. Crashing through a window and landing violently on the ground, Sparrow is spared from death. Sadly, the same could not be said of her sister.

Sparrow later awakens as a young adult under the care of a Seeress named Theresa, a non-playing from the first *Fable* game. Theresa explains Sparrow's destiny as the Hero of Bowerstone. Informing Sparrow that she will be in contact with her along her journey, Theresa sets Sparrow on her way with the information necessary to begin her quest to find

the other three Heroes in order to defeat Lord Lucien. And so begins the epic quest of *Fable II*.

The game takes place over the course of Sparrow's adult life; days cycle to night, and seasons change over time. The passing of time is also reflected in Sparrow's physical features as she ages and changes appearance. Sparrow befriends a dog as a young child which stays with the player-character throughout the game. While serving as a companion, the dog also fulfills several functions such as leading the player to treasures or aiding in combat. It is possible to start a family and have interpersonal (intimate) relationships in or out of wedlock. *Fable II* is also one of the few games that allow same-sex relationships. These relationships, the companionship with the dog, and the ability to develop interpersonal bonds, act to give the gameworld depth and to connect the player to the game on a more personal level. They influence Sparrow's moral alignment, however, as the player discovers during gameplay, they do not directly affect the narrative outcome of the game.

A fully interactive and dynamic gameworld, the player is encouraged to explore all areas of the map. Items can be found hidden in chests or buried in the ground. They can also be purchased from vendors found throughout Albion. As the main storyline is relatively linear, the player can opt to play the game straight through by simply completing the quests assigned to Sparrow for the direct purpose of finding the other three Heroes to defeat Lucien, or they can seek out to explore the vast land of Albion by completing other quests that develop the narrative further but that do not influence the main storyline. These secondary quests can increase faction, influence alignment, and help in acquiring items

throughout the game. Combat is frequent, whether it is with a narratively scripted foe or a group of bandits blocking a path, the player battles with an arsenal of weapons and spells which they accumulate and upgrade over time.

Through developing Strength, Skill, and Will, the player can optimize Sparrow's combat effectiveness. These three abilities are developed through collecting experience orbs through combat. Cultivating Strength increases effectiveness in hand to hand combat that includes the use of melee weapons such as swords and hammers. There are three distinct areas that are able to be advanced: Brutal Styles, Physique, and Toughness. Within each of these three subareas, there are four possible skill levels. Focusing on Skill allows the player to proficiently use weapons such as guns and crossbows. There are also three categories that can be developed: Dexterous Styles, Accuracy, and Speed. Finally, focusing on Will enables the player to cast magical spells on their enemies. There are eight different spells that can be upgraded up to five levels. These spells are: Chaos, Force Push, Inferno, Raise Dead, Shock, Blades, Time Control, and Vortex. Experience orbs are gained through combat and are spread across the three abilities and include general XP (experience) which dictates the level of your character. Ultimately, it is up to the player to decide how they want to balance their character by choosing how to distribute their accumulated experience orbs.

The game allows the player to save at any time during the game by simply accessing the Pause menu and selecting the 'save game' option. This allows the player to save any progress and either continue playing or to exit the game completely. This is also where the inventory and map screens are located. Gameplay is paused when the player enters the

Pause/Inventory screen causing all action in the gameworld to freeze until the player returns to the primary game screen. While this is a welcome feature for the player, it does create a separation between the gameplay, and will be discussed later in this chapter.

Aesthetically, the animation is “something between Tolkien-pastoral idyll, and a pre-industrial city setting. There are vast stretches of meadow, forest, gloomy swamp, but also settlements from the gypsy camp to Bowerstone: a developing late feudal city with a castle at its center” (Ruch, 2010a, ¶ 5). The color palette ranges from winter greys and the browns and beiges of the villages (figure 25) to the vibrant greens of the meadows and forests and the serene pastels of the summer skies (figure 26) with many shades and colors in between. While there is often sharp contrast in colors, it is rare to see jarring, angular lines, even in moments of combat.



*Figure 25: City Browns*



*Figure 26: Vibrant Country Side*

The color palette and animation aesthetic aids in immersing the player into the fantastical world of Albion while simultaneously keeping the player grounded in a world that is familiar, even if fictional by drawing on.

## 5.2 The Player

It goes without saying that the player is one of the primary elements necessary in the process of gameplay as has been stated in the previous chapters. However, in RPG's, the role of the player is amplified as they are required not only to navigate the gameworld, control the action on the screen, and manipulate the player-character, but they must also develop the player-character based on a range of options that often goes beyond simply unfolding a pre-determined narrative. Aligning with good or evil, selecting what quests to take on, or even how much exploration one is willing (or wants) to do differs depending on the individual player, their interests and gameplay style. As such, in a world as open as *Fable II*, it becomes nearly impossible to write about a prescribed path or of a generalized, implied player (Aarseth, 2007) as each play experience can be as unique as each player. This is not to say that there are not aspects of the game design that funnels all players down a particular path or that restricts gameplay in the same manner for all players, but that there can be many readings of the RPG play experience (Bizzocchi & Tannenbaum, 2010).

In *Fable II*, the player is given the option to select either a male or female hero, both bearing the same name, Sparrow. As a female, I opted to play along my own gender lines and select the female Sparrow. While I could not create the avatar, there are a myriad of possible ways to alter her physical appearance – both aesthetically and functionally which have the potential to affect overall gameplay.

### 5.2.1 Player/Player-character

It's all up to you. Man or woman, good or evil, career and family, or just you and your faithful canine companion – live life your way.

(*Fable II*, Game Box).

As the quote introducing this section implies, it is all up to the “you” (the player) to decide what kind of life they want to have in the world of Albion. As such, the following section will focus on the player aspect of the *player/player-character* relationship, with a section focusing on the explicit development of the player-character later on in this chapter.

While Sparrow is a pre-created character with a pre-destined narrative, there are many aspects of the game that allows the player to shape the player-character. For example, within the first few minutes of the game, ‘Little Sparrow’ and her sister Rose want to buy the magical music box, but its purchase requires five gold coins. Finding quests in the town of Bowerstone is simple enough; from helping to find lost deeds that blew away in the wind to stealing alcohol for an itinerant. While not explicitly stated, the player must decide whether or not to succeed at all costs and complete all quests regardless if they fall on the side of evil, or to follow the path of good. Although this first decision may appear to be arbitrary, throughout the course of gameplay, the player comes to learn that every such decision adds up to develop who Sparrow will become.

#### 5.2.1.1 Player Ability

With a very short cinematic introduction as previously described, the player is thrown directly into what Therrien defines in his 2007 article “To Get Help, Please Press X:

The rise of the assistance paradigm in video game design” as a “dynamic tutorial level, where basic mechanics are presented clearly and new elements are introduced gradually” (p. 7). This enables the player to learn the controls and get a sense of the gameworld in a safe environment. While the player is assigned simple tasks and short quests in this opening interactive sequence, the game directs the player each step along the way through the use of a glittering golden trail that spans out in front of the player-character leading the player to the next location on their quest. This guided opening sequence is also a chance for the player to be introduced to the narrative context for the upcoming gameplay.

The gradual introduction of gameplay elements also follows the narrative structure specific to *Fable II*. As the player begins the game through the eyes of Little Sparrow, any time they get lost or fail to complete a task could be attributed not only the player’s inexperience, but also could be attributed to the challenges that face a young hero like Little Sparrow; it is plausible that a child would get lost or struggle with even the simplest of tasks that may be easily completed by an adept adult.

After collecting the five gold coins and purchasing the magical music box, Sparrow and her sister Rose make a wish for a better life. Although they are described as street urchins, parentless, and living in the streets, they remain optimistic and dream of another world high above the village in Castle Fairfax. Until, of course, they are summoned to the castle on that fateful day, when Lord Lucien kills Rose and attempts to kill Sparrow as well. Rose’s death, and the image of Sparrow crashing through the stained glass window high above the ground, signals the end of the interactive opening cinematic, but this sequence could also be construed as the end of Sparrow’s innocence as well.

Awakening ten years later, Sparrow is explained her destiny and sent on her first task to collect items to begin her adventures to find the three other Heroes. With basic weapons and minimal skill in hand, early combat sequences are simple, and experience points are collected relatively easily. The game progresses in difficulty in response to Sparrow's development. The more the player is successful in combat, the more experience points they accumulate, which leads to the possibility to level of any of the three ability areas described earlier. If the player lacks the skills to successfully beat the enemies, they are not able to continue on with the quests. The player may explore the gameworld but would not be able to continue on, forwarding the narrative through gameplay. As the player becomes more adept at manipulating the controls (leading to successful combat experiences), Sparrow grows stronger as well. This is only one of the ways that Sparrow's development is directly tied to player proficiency.

There are other ways that player (in)ability potentially influences both gameplay and player-character development. For example, early on in the game, Sparrow was in Bowerstone to continue a quest. In an attempt to interact with a non-playing character, it was my full intention to greet the villager amicably. However, I had still not memorized what buttons on the controller were assigned to what actions and accidentally drew my weapon instead of waving hello. While in many games, this may have been a harmless player error, in *Fable II*, this mistaken action had negative consequences as drawing your weapon in the city, while by default cannot physically harm the citizens, causes panic and fear in the villagers leading to a decrease in Sparrow's reputation (known in the game as 'renown'). For many quests, Sparrow requires a favourable 'renown' level and so this



action caused by inexperience, inadvertently altered Sparrow's identity and the trajectory of gameplay.

Player ability can also be manifested visually on Sparrow. While death is relatively absent from the game – instead she loses unconsciousness – through her Heroic power and at the cost of experience points, she is always brought back to life during combat, fully regenerated. After every such resurrection, she awakens with what appears to be glowing blue scars (figure 27) on her face and body.



*Figure 27 : Glowing Blue Scars*

As such, if Sparrow were to be played by a skilled player, she would have less scarring; and less scarring would infer a skilled player. Aesthetically, these scars define who Sparrow is as a warrior and is directly related to the individual player. One could even go so far as to say that each play session, even by the same player, would result in a different aesthetic version of Sparrow visually mapping out the player's success and failures. These are but two examples of how player ability (or inability) can affect the player-character in ways the player may not have intended or desired.

### **5.2.1.2 Player Control, Camera Angles & Perspective**

There are only a few cut-scenes in the game where the player loses complete control of the player-character. Otherwise, all other narrative exchanges are defined as being interactive, enabling the player to move freely. Even though the player has complete control of the player-character, they cannot interrupt the non-player character or interact with them in any consequential way. The non-playing character continues on its with its scripted sequence and pays no attention to the player-character no matter what the player does (including walking away from the scene completely). The use of interactive cut-scenes can keep the player integrated in the active game (Chen, 2007), yet it is somewhat of a ‘false’ sense of interaction (Harrell & Zhu, 2009) since the player’s actions have no impact on the delivery of the information or on the outcome of the cut-scene. In most cases, there are no dialogue options for the player to select beyond the command to accept a quest.

The entire game is set in the third person perspective where the player is put in a position to ‘watch’ the player-character perform the actions instead of seeing the action through the eyes of the player-character directly. There is the option for the player to switch to a first-person perspective (by pushing the Left Bumper – or LB button) but the button must remain depressed for the camera to remain in place. If the player requires their hands (or fingers) to manipulate other control schemes, they are forced to remove their finger from the LB button and are automatically shifted back into third-person view. Finally, the player can, when instructed by the game, zoom towards a designated object, area or non-playing character often outside the player’s view or focus by pushing the left trigger (LT button). This normally occurs when the player-character is receiving narrative information or a quest’s instructions from a non-playing character. However, whether or not the player

actually chooses to press the LT button, there is little to no consequence to the unfolding of the narrative.

Even though the player has complete control of the camera for most of the game, as the camera moves, the perspective zooms in on awkward angles that often cannot be controlled. At times, something as simple as trying to get a close-up view of Sparrow's face can prove quite difficult. As the player rotates the right joystick to zoom the camera in closer, they must also rotate the left joystick position Sparrow's body to get the appropriate angle (by moving her body position), but with each minuscule movement, the camera shifts, making getting that perfect close-up all the more challenging as Sparrow shifts and turns.

It is also often a challenge to get the perspective right during navigation since the right joystick functions as the movement control, used to walk or run forward. For example, the simple task of running through a cave can become an arduous task for someone who is not completely adept at manipulating the joysticks. Pushing the joystick forward to run also causes the camera to move around the player-character in response to the terrain. As such, it is easy for the camera to turn towards the wall to the left (or right) of the player-character even if the player's intention is to run straight ahead.

Manipulating the camera and moving the player-character becomes an even bigger challenge during combat. While the combat system is a simple one-button schema (X for Melee attacks, Y for ranged attacks, and B for magical attacks), the control of the player-character remains an obstacle as it requires the player to constantly move the camera while fighting to see the enemies. If the combat is taking place in an open space, then the

continuous alteration of camera angles may not be too troublesome. However, when fighting in close quarters, there are moments when the camera rotates and ends up stuck behind a pillar or gets stuck behind a wall, making it impossible to see the action. This sort of camera glitch may seem harmless, but during large combat sequences with multiple targets, it can delay attack or even result in death.

While most, if not all, role-playing games are played in the third-person perspective, there is an inherent contradiction between the goal of the genre (to immerse the player into the gameworld) and the use of the third-person camera angle. The goal of the genre is often to immerse the player into the gameworld by embedding meaningful player choices and player-character creation and development into the gameplay structure. There is ample literature discussing how character customization connects the player to game world (Gazzard, 2011; Lankoski, 2011; Lim & Byron, 2009; Wagonner 2009) and how the player-character is often plays a functional – or prosthetic – role, acting as an ‘extension’ of the player (Gee, 2003; Klevjer, 2006; Linderöth, 2005, Williams & Smith, 2007). But how does point-of view (POV) affect the potential for player-connectedness and immersion?

In their 2009 article “Being in the Game: Effects of avatar choice and point of view on psychophysiological responses during play” Lim and Reeves argue that:

... the visual POV [point of view] acts as a formal feature of video games that determines the player’s psychological connection to the avatar by visually presenting how separate the visual representation of the character is different from the player. Depending on the player’s POV, incoming sensorial information is processed in a frame where locations are either

centered around another person (third-person POV) or one's own perspective (first-person POV) (p. 353).

The goal of many role-playing games is to engross the player into the gameworld by giving the player a sense of agency, yet using a third-person point of view potentially disrupts any sense of immersion the player may have felt by situating the results of the player's actions in an external body. Lim and Reeves articulate this point further, stating "A third-person POV presents the character onscreen, portrayed as corporally separate from the player. This separation in visual representation likely detaches the player from the character even more than in the case of a first-person POV" (p. 353). Even though the player is responsible for making choices for and via the player-character, by not having control of the point of view; the player is reminded that they are not the central embodiment of action, but are central to the control of the action. This is reinforced by the fact that the player has control of the camera, but not of the point-of view<sup>20</sup>.

### **5.2.2 Player/Game Environment**

Beyond the body and limbs of the player-character, the player must learn to navigate their way around the game environment. As an RPG, the gameworld of Albion is wide open for exploration with only a few restricted areas such as the Fairfax Castle and the Spire. The player is encouraged to venture off the beaten path and explore the world beyond the guided quests. However, the game environment spans well beyond the cartographic world of Albion and bleeds into complex option menus and interfaces.

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<sup>20</sup> While the player can change point-of view from third- to first- person, there is no way to change POV's permanently.

### 5.2.2.1 Visual Elements, Interface & Inventory

From communicating direction to indicating alliance, interface to the game's geography, there is a wide range of visual elements that play different roles within the game that enable to player to navigate the gameworld. One of the most obvious communicative visual tools found in the game is the use of a glittering golden trail (figure 28) that leads the way to quests. When accepting a quest, the path appears in front of the player-character, pointing them in the right direction. The path can be set for any of the quests the player may be working on, changing the trajectory of the path at any given time. The golden trail is a default setting, but it can be turned off, or adjusted to be light, medium or dark (prominent). Albeit helpful, it can be a distraction and is often detrimental to exploring off the beaten path. It can be very easy to simply follow the trail to the next destination on the quest list and pass over an opportunity to investigate beyond the directed path, explore the countryside, or the shops in the villages.



*Figure 28: Golden Trail Leading the Way*

The glittering trail can actually be counter to what the player should actually do. For example, during a sequence where Sparrow is given a quest to help an NPC find his son who is lost in a cave, the player is led into the labyrinth of tunnels by the glittering ‘breadcrumb’ trail. After several smaller combats, there is a point where there are too many enemies up ahead and Theresa tells you to get out of there. The only way to do so without entering combat is to turn around and run the other way. Trying to remember the way back from which I came was difficult since I had followed the shimmering path through the maze of caves – as such, I was not as aware of my surroundings and did not take note of any geographic markers – with the enemies hot on my tail, the attempt to run out of the caves was made more stressful without the aid of the golden trail leading the way to safety. In the end, the only way out of the cave was to fight the throng of enemies and continue my way forward – essentially ignoring Theresa’s repeated warnings that ‘there are too many of them, get out of there’.

Interestingly, counter to the presumed function of the glittering path, it has been said that the mini-map traditionally found in the upper right hand corner of many videogames was abandoned in *Fable II* in hopes to “...achieve a more immersive experience that is truer to life” (Ruch, 2010b, p. 6). Yet as Ruch points out, many people today use GPS technology to navigate the real world, making the mini-map a more realistic navigational tool than the golden glittering trail spanning out in front of Sparrow wherever she goes.

While the glittering trail is a visual element within the diegesis of the game, there are many others that appear outside of the fiction of the game but that serve the purpose of informing the player of a possible action. The heads-up display (HUD), a layer of visually

represented information that is superimposed over the gameworld, gives the player additional information pertaining to the game world. As defined in Ruch's 2010b article "Videogame Interface: Artefacts and Tropes",

Relaying information from the gameworld to the player is the first job of a videogame's interface. Since the possible gamestates are virtually infinite in an avatar-based game world, heads-up displays [HUD] often flag contextual situations where a particular action button can be used to perform myriad actions, from opening doors, pressing buttons to lighting fires or untying a captive NPC. These flags will alert the player to the possibility of interacting with the gameworld, which invokes the interface's second function: converting button-presses or other input methods into gameworld actions (p. 5).

For example, when approaching a door that can be opened, it often has a purple glow around it (a diegetic visual element) to indicate that the door can be interacted with, but there is also an image of the green "A" button in a circle in the middle of the door (a non-, or 'extra'-diegetic visual element). This indicates to the player that in order to open the door, the player must push on the "A" button on their controller. Even though this is pertinent information for the player, it breaks the fiction of the gameworld. These kind of visual cues are necessary because the "A" button serves many interactive functions, from engaging in conversation with NPC's to opening treasure chests, without the game's prompting, the player would be forced to either try to interact with every object in the gameworld, or worse, not bother at all.



There are many aspects to the user interface (UI) in *Fable II* that are only presented to the player within its necessary context. For instance, when the player is navigating through the countryside, the screen is practically void of any extra visual cues beyond the glowing trail leading the player forward; there is no health bar on display, no icon representing Sparrow's inventory. However, icons appear on the screen as they become necessary. When entering into combat, the player's health bar will appear in the upper left hand corner and if the player has healing potions, when Sparrow hits a certain level of health, nearing unconsciousness, an icon representing the directional pad appears and prompts the player to hit the ← arrow to drink the potion while in combat. These are only two examples of how the game controls visual cues and information through strategic implementation of the interface. Of course, the player has access to all the interface icons and menus by pressing a range of buttons: Pressing the right trigger (RT) will enable access to the spell selector; the right bumper (RB) grants access to the expression wheel that allows the player to choose from a range of expressions and emotions for interacting with NPC's; these all open superimposed over the primary game screen.

Finally, pressing the Start button opens access to the Pause menu that houses a complex inventory system, maps, quests and the save screens which is in its own screen distinctly set apart from the gameworld (figure 29).



*Figure 29: Separate Inventory Screen*

Each one of the tabs in the image above open to reveal multiple sub tabs, for example, the Abilities tab opens to display each individual ability as detailed at the beginning of the chapter. Whereas the Items tab expands to include potions, trophies and food items to name only a few. It is a complex system that often times feels disjointed from the gameworld and active gameplay but serves a necessary function. The player is informed when there are new items in any given tab by the presence of an exclamation point after the tab's title.

Another defining characteristic of the role-playing genre is the ability to collect and carry a wide range of items including weapons, potions, clothing, artefacts, and gifts for the villagers. As such, it is common for role-playing games to offer an unlimited storage capacity, although it is often not explained with the fiction of the game. *Fable II* is of no exception. Sparrow does not carry a set of backpacks or visits a bank to access her items. There is no direct account of what happens to the items she collects and how she comes to

access her entire collection at any given time. There is no visual reference to Sparrow digging through her possessions for the player to observe putting the player in sole control of Sparrow's inventory; nothing to connect the player's action of looking through the inventory to Sparrow.

In this sense, the inventory set-up is unrealistic, even within the fiction of the game. Ruch clarifies: "The interface, of course, makes these games playable, and gamers are often willing to ignore the inconsistency of these tropes in order to participate in the game" (2010b, p. 4). Therefore, while general game design tendencies have been shifting towards inventories that are realistically integrated into the gameplay (as we saw in chapter four), players accept elements that are inconsistent to the game's fiction for the sake of playability. Since it is a common trope in role-playing games that the player-character has unlimited storage capacity, the details are rarely questioned.

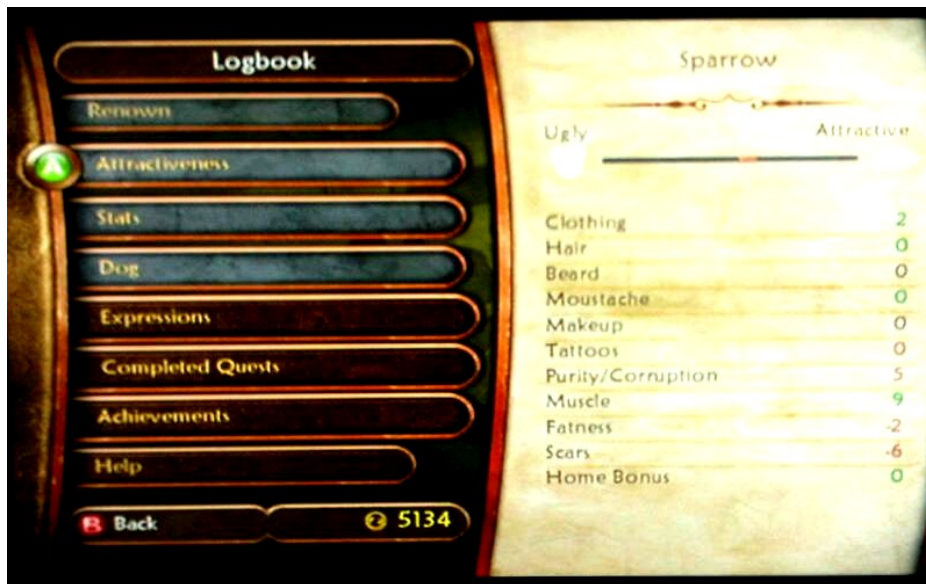
This same argument could be used to explain the fact that when entering the inventory screen in *Fable II*, all in-game action pauses, including combat when the player enters the inventory screen<sup>21</sup>. Of course, this flies in the face of any 'reality' – even within a fantasy genre – pausing gameplay in this manner often allows the player to drink a healing potion or switch weapons in mid-combat without any consequence to the gameplay, yet it can be argued that it further enhances playability by enabling a more continuous gameplay experience. This could also account for unlimited ammunition for any and all weapons

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<sup>21</sup> Tellingly, the button to access the inventory screen is labelled the 'pause menu' in the accompanying game booklet.

Sparrow has in her arsenal. Although combat is an integral part of the game, with unlimited ammunition, it is easy to assume that it is not meant to be the focal point of gameplay.

Finally, within the pause menu, similar to the visual commands that appear on the screen to instruct the player how to open a door or dig a hole, there is information that is connected to the player-character but that is solely meant for the player. While it could be said that spell descriptions and weapons stats are solely intended for the player, it is plausible that such information would be acquired and used by Sparrow herself; most mages carry a spell book and wouldn't purchase a weapon or piece of armour without knowing how powerful or protective it was. However, there is a menu that delineates a range of Sparrow's personal attributes (figure 30) that is developed by the player that acts more as an informational tool for the player than for information realistically intended for Sparrow.



*Figure 30: Attractiveness Scale*

The goal of this particular screen is to inform the player how their attributes rank, but also how NPC's view Sparrow based on their gameplay decisions. From attractiveness

(which helps when looking for a mate) to purity (which can influence trade prices), this menu communicates pertinent information the player requires to successfully (in whichever way the player determines that to be) develop the player-character and interact with the gameworld.

#### **5.2.2.2 Lighting & Audio Elements**

While lighting often plays an effective role in most single-player games to create atmosphere and tension as we saw in chapter four, in *Fable II*, lighting is rarely, if ever used as an ambient tool used to create atmosphere or to evoke an emotional response in the player. The use of lighting is almost exclusively used to signify the transition between day and night, to represent a dark cave or interior spaces, or to set the scene. However, lighting, even when not used to as a narrative technique, serves other purposes such as “... establishing visibility for important areas in the scene, directing viewer’s attention to important areas (visual focus), establishing depth, and evoking moods, as well as providing information, such as the time of day and environment setting” (El-Nasr, Zupko & Miron, 2005, p. 2).

Similarly, the use of audio elements is relatively restricted to diegetic aspects of the game that act as an ambient enhancement; bits and pieces of random conversations as Sparrow walks past NPC’s, the town crier announcing that the shops are closed for the night, the casting of spells during combat, narrative exchanges and, at times, lightly ambient music as Sparrow crosses the countryside on foot.

Interestingly, there are a lot of silent moments throughout the game with only the faint sound of a bird tweeting in the distance, or the sound of Sparrow digging in the dirt

with her shovel looking for buried treasures, all of which help to create an atmosphere of solitude that sets the tone for the heroic quest Sparrow is embarked upon.

### 5.2.3 Player/Player

*Fable II* contains a co-operative gameplay mode which was available as downloadable content shortly after the release of the original game. Co-op allows two players to play co-located or online through Xbox Live. One player controls Sparrow while the second player takes on a secondary role as a henchman/henchwoman even if both players have their own character. This is explained narratively in that there can only be one Hero of Bowerstone in Albion (as such, there cannot reasonably be two Sparrows). The entire game can be played co-operatively, players can opt to do side quests, or simply interact together in and with the gameworld. Content played in co-op gameplay is separate from the main game for the player who plays the henchman, but experience and gold can be saved to the account of the henchman's saved game. The amount of which is shared is determined by the host player (playing Sparrow).

When playing on Xbox Live (online), other online players are represented by purple orbs in the gameworld. The player can interact with the orb in multiple ways including checking out each other's character stats, exchange gifts or invite them to join a game by clicking on them. If they accept, they appear into the gameworld 'seamlessly'. The invited player appears as the henchman or henchwoman (which they choose) and is able to customize player-character's gender, alignment, and primary weapons. Interestingly, both player actions affect the gameworld of the host player. If the invited player chooses to attack villagers or steal from vendors, then the host's player-character suffers the

consequences. Similarly, invited players can help bolster the host player's popularity or level of goodness by giving gifts to the villagers or performing other favourable tasks.

During online gameplay, players can communicate with each other through VoIP (voice over IP). This is a welcome feature for planning strategies, talking about the game or for general social interaction. One slight drawback to the VoIP is that as the player approaches the purple orbs scattered in their gameworld, they hear the players' 'real world' conversations they may be having through their microphones. Finally, unlike the single-player gameplay, whether playing on- or offline, the camera is fixed to keep both players on the screen together at all times. Even though it is useful for co-located gameplay where players are playing on one screen, the forced camera obligates the players to stay within proximity of each other, narrowing the range of play possibilities. However, this also reinforces the idea that the players are supposed to be playing together and not off doing their own thing.

Players can also play co-located offline on one Xbox 360. There is no difference in the actual content of the game, but playing in a shared physical space; both players are fixated on the same mediated space instead of focusing on two separate screens that are mediated through an internet connection. This does not necessarily influence the action within the gameworld, yet it does have the potential to affect the way the game is played, and as such, the way the player's perceive that game.

Co-located gaming double the focus from the internal game space and puts an emphasis on the social aspect of collective gameplay. In their 2009 article "Wii All Play:

The Console Game as a Computational Meeting Place”, Volda and Greenberg explain that there are:

... two levels of social interactions surrounding gameplay: *internally derived social interactions* stem from the rules of the game (e.g., the roles that gamers take on when they play), while *externally derived social interactions* stem from factors originating outside the game (e.g., “pre-existing friendships and rivalries”) (p. 1561).

Co-operative interactions can extend the gameworld beyond the scripted game as players plot out the actions of their player-characters, producing shared narratives that are driven by the game’s content, but not necessarily defined by it. These narratives are equally influenced by the ‘externally derived social interactions’. It could be argued that depending on the relationship the players have with each other prior playing the game together that certain actions are more likely to occur.

For example, it is plausible that two best friends are more apt to help each other out in whatever that may mean to the hosting player. If the player’s goal is to play evil, then the friend will likely perform evil actions to keep within the context of their hosting friend’s imposed narrative. By there being no consequence for the invited player, they can perform in-game actions they may not otherwise perform in their own game. Subsequently, this very same issue can be detrimental when playing online co-op with strangers. Since there are no consequences for the player’s game who plays the henchman/woman, then they can perform actions that may hinder the host player’s gameworld without any consequences.



Either way, the co-op feature in *Fable II*, has the potential to alter the player's gameplay experience, and for the host player, their gameworld.

As player interactions are on a one-to-one level during co-op play, many play sessions are often onetime events. The host is always Sparrow, and the invited player – the guest – is always the Henchman (or Henchwoman). Even if the players perform equal functional tasks, the secondary player can never meaningfully develop their own player-character beyond collecting gold and experiences points. Narratively speaking, their time invested in the game does not hold the same weight as the primary player's time/efforts. On the other hand, the primary player has the opportunity to expand his experience in broader way by sharing their gameworld with an active secondary character that expands the narrative potential in their specific played context. As such, since there is an inherent hierarchy built into the co-op gameplay, the potential for equally meaningful play for both players is imbalanced, ultimately changing the dynamic of the interactions between the players.

### **5.3 The Player-Character**

The player-character is the locus of all interaction within the gameworld. It is what enables the player to not only navigate, but also to experience the gameworld on levels otherwise not possible for the player alone. As Ruch (2010b) explains,

The videogame avatar is a simulated person in a simulated world, but the player does not (with today's technology) have direct access to their sensorium. The videogame has to simulate the collected awareness that a

game character would have, primarily about the avatar's body, and the general 'gamestate' (p. 5).

This simulated 'collected awareness' is visually produced by the game's design but jointly created through active gameplay.

Upon loading the game, the player has the choice to play either a male or female character. The player-character's name is fixed regardless of gender – Sparrow (Little Sparrow in the beginning) as is he/r basic physical appearance. The game spans most of Sparrow's adult life, roughly divided into ten year intervals; it was ten years between the death of Sparrow's sister, Rose, and Sparrow's rebirth of sorts, nursed back to health by Theresa. When Sparrow embarks on the quest to the Spire to find Garth, the Hero of Will, time passes by counting the weeks. However, upon her successful return, the player is informed that it has been "ten long years" since Sparrow left to join Lucien's army.

In *Fable II*, the player is responsible for not only learning about the player-character through gameplay and narrative exploration, they also have a mighty hand in creating who she becomes through gameplay choices that affect her physical attributes, motivations and identity. These characteristics further influence her moral alignments and even the physical gameworld.

### **5.3.1 Player/Player-Character**

The recurring theme of the potential for the blurring of the lines between the player and the player-character in videogames that is at the core of this dissertation is most prominently seen in the role-playing genre where player-character's "capacity" and "appearance" (Tronstad, 2008) blend with player motives and desires. In RPG's and *Fable*

*II* specifically, that the player plays a significant role in creating and developing the player-character. While Sparrow is a fixed character with pre-scripted back-story, the player gets to decide who Sparrow will become by making moral choices and performing a range of actions that affect her physical characteristics and disposition. Although not all of actions influence the narrative progression of the primary storyline, they all work towards creating a unique, player-created version of Sparrow. While it is understood that the player is responsible for actively developing the player-character, this section will focus on the player-character aspect of the *player/player-character* relationship.

#### **5.3.1.1 Altering Aesthetics**

While the game's design enables the player to explore the gameworld and interact with the environment and non-playing characters, when playing a single-player player role-playing game, one of the primary focuses is to develop the player-character in order to successfully complete the tasks, challenges, and quests set forth by the game's design. This usually means developing strength, procuring magic and collecting items (clothing, artefacts, etc) that will give the player a 'statistical' boost when in combat situations.

Sparrow begins the game with a wooden sword and a toy gun used to destroy beetles in one the very first quests assigned to her during childhood. She upgrades weapons at the beginning of the second scene when Sparrow awakens ten years later after being nursed back to health. The novice arsenal includes a crossbow and sword (representing a ranged and melee weapons). While relatively low in damage, the sword is 'rusty' after all, they perform the task at hand of slaying bandits along the path to Bowerstone.

As the player explores the gameworld they are able to upgrade their weapons by either finding items in treasure chests or purchasing from weapon vendors. In the beginning, most weapons are either equal to or only a slight upgrade to the weapons currently in Sparrow's inventory. But as gameplay progresses, and the player accumulates enough skill points and begin to allocate points to specific ability trees, the player must decide on what weapons best suit their chosen skills. For example, I spent most of my points building up strength with the idea that being strong will help me in melee combat. As such, when faced with the choice of a new weapon, it was in my best interest to select a melee weapon; axe, cleaver, sword, etc.

Consequently, by concentrating my skill points into strength, I had unintentionally<sup>22</sup> contributed to Sparrow's physical transformation. By putting points into the 'physique' category, which enabled Sparrow to cause more damage with her weapons, ultimately altered her physique in the game. She was more muscular; beefier even. By opting to place points into the 'accuracy' skill, Sparrow's damage dealt with a crossbow was increased. Inadvertently, it also made her taller. In the end, by focusing on weapon skills, I had altered the way that Sparrow looked in a way that was beyond my control.

This also occurs when outfitting Sparrow. There is often a difference between the most 'functional' item of clothing – the one that has the most protective stats – and the most 'aesthetically' pleasing one. Granted, aesthetic value is something inferred by the player, but often the two 'function' and 'aesthetic' are not found in the same item (Klastrup

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<sup>22</sup> I rarely read more than the accompanying guide booklet when playing a new game, and as such did not realize that this was a consequence/result of allocating strength points.

& Tosca, 2008). I was often faced with the decision of outfitting Sparrow in the most functional clothing available when in times of combat, but upon entering the village, opting to change into a more ‘aesthetically pleasing’ outfit that served no other function than to look good.

While all players begin the game with Sparrow wearing the same ‘starting outfit’, over the course of the game, players must make functional and aesthetic decisions along the way, regardless of how much (or little) interest the player has in the aesthetic aspect of the game. From hair dyes and styles, to dyes for clothing, for players who like to alter the player-character in ways beyond combat utility, there are a range of options offered in the game. Players can go into any village and purchase these items to alter Sparrow’s appearance. Such customization enables the player to engage in the game in ways that go beyond the pure function of items as it pertains to the game’s designed intent and allows the player to develop a level of fiction not included in the original script.

The way Sparrow looks has a huge impact on gameplay outside of combat situations and can be influenced by almost all activity within the game. From eating fruit (eliciting a smooth complexion) or meat (giving Sparrow pock marks on her face, as eating meat is deemed to be evil, as a life was taken); eating healthy foods or fatty foods results in Sparrow being thin or fat. Therefore the player is forced to make decisions based not only on the healing powers of these food items, but also on broader identity decisions. Identity in the sense of not only how Sparrow looks, but also what kind of person the player wants Sparrow to be within the options (and consequences) offered in the game, and how the player wants Sparrow to be perceived.

Visual traits such as scaring further influences gameplay and affects how non-playing character's see you. There are ways to get rid of the scaring, such as through sleep, consuming potions or donating to the Temple of Light. However, these methods come with their own altering effects; using potions is deemed to be unnatural and aligned with evil, as such lowers Sparrow's morality level.

Sparrow's alignment is also reflected aesthetically; blond hair, blue eyes and bright white teeth, even a halo if she aligns with purity and goodness, and aligning with evil will exhibit black hair, pale skin, rotting teeth and red eyes, with devil horns sprouting at the most evil of the spectrum. Sparrow's alignment is also reflected in her dog. If Sparrow is aligned with good, the dog will have a light golden with blue eyes, while the dog affiliated with Sparrow if she aligns with evil will be pitch black with red eyes. Sparrow's looks are further influenced by the purity and corruption affecting her complexion favourably or negatively (healthy, perfect complexion as opposed to red blotches on her skin and sickly yellowy green eyes). Alignment influences gameplay by affecting how Sparrow is perceived and is responded to by non-playing characters.

Although the player does not have the ability to create and name Sparrow before entering the game, all of these aesthetic changes in Sparrow derive from the gameplay choices of the player, making it plausible that no two versions of Sparrow is ever quite identical. This type of in-game customization of even a pre-scripted character works towards drawing the player into the gameworld, aiding in developing a meaningful connection between player and player/character and the gameplay experience as a whole.

### 5.3.1.2 Forced aesthetics

As a single-player game, there are moments in the gameplay that all players are funnelled into the identical narrative path in order to further the main objective of the game; to collect the three Heroes and ultimately defeat Lucien. Such homogenization is at its most obvious when the player reaches the stage where they must join Lucien's army to find Garth, the Hero of Will who is held captive in the Spire.

When Sparrow arrives at the docks, preparing to board the ship that will take her away, she is informed that she will be stripped of all of her belongings, and that her dog cannot come along either. When the player sees Sparrow next, her head is shaved and she is wearing a heavy set of brown armour that is identical to all the other NPC guards in the Spire. This acts to strip away any individualization of gameplay up until this point. No longer Sparrow, a cumulative amalgamation of played and designed experiences, she becomes 'Officer 273' for the next ten years. All players who play along the narrative lines of the game, and not simply playing 'in' the gameworld for the sake of exploration and entertainment, are forced into the same aesthetic and take on the same functional role.

While the player-character is stripped of all items and weapons accumulated up until the point that they join Lucien's army, standardizing the player-character aesthetically across all potential paths of gameplay (Figure 31), the player still has the option to make moral / ethical choices along the way. Choosing to feed the starving prisoner's or not (when explicitly instructed not to); choosing whether or not to kill a guard you have become friends with as ordered by the Commandant, etc. Each of these acts affects 'Officer 273's' morality level, however, perhaps not quite as the player may have originally intended.



*Figure 31: Officer 273 in Lucien's Army Gear*

In a twist of narrative gameplay, while Sparrow is part of Lucien's army, her allegiance is supposed to be along the lines of evil. As such, when Officer 273 performs what is seen as a 'good' deed (feeding a prisoner), Sparrow loses some of her experience points, in what can be perceived as an act of sacrifice if the player is playing Sparrow along the lines of good.

All of these aesthetic possibilities work towards giving the player the ability not only to control the player-character and feel involved in their development, even when narrative power dictates otherwise, it gives the player the control to alter an aspect of the game's interface. This is rearticulated in Barr, Biddle and Brown's 2006 article "Changing the Virtual Self", when they state that:

the ability to change the avatar is central to gameplay in those games that allow it. It amounts to the ability to alter the very interface being used to play the game and affects the gameplay in important ways, both from the



perspective of the functions available to the player, as well as the aesthetic experience of the game (p. 83).

Indeed, although the changes described throughout this section are manifested aesthetically, they also influence gameplay altering the gameplay experience for each player. Although a scripted single-player game played through a ready-made player-character, each player has the opportunity to experience a range of unique gameplay instances despite a designed linear narrative.

### **5.3.2 Player-Character/Non-Playing Character**

As a single-player game (excluding co-op play), the primary basis for social interactions within the game occurs with non-playing characters (NPC). In *Fable II*, there is no shortage of NPC's for Sparrow to interact with. There are four categories of NPC's found within the game and each type of NPC's plays an important role in the overall gameplay experience, albeit on different levels and in different ways. The four types are: the primary narrative characters, secondary narrative characters, general NPC's, and enemy NPC's.

In discussing the design of artificial intelligence (AI) for role-playing games, in their 2004 technical report *AI in Computer Games: From the Player's Goal to AI's Role*, Glasser and Soh explain, that "A RPG game will require two primary types of AI. The first is concerned with support character AI and enemy AI. Both are concerned with character movement and strategy, though their goals differ." (p. 5). In this sense, we can understand that the AI of the support character, the primary and secondary characters, is designed to push the narrative forward and aid in strategy development for the player. Primary narrative

characters include Theresa, Lord Lucien, and the Heroes, Sister Hannah, Garth, and Reaver. The secondary narrative characters that Sparrow interacts with at various stages of the story include the Abbott in Oakfield and the Commandant in the Spire and act to connect a particular quest or task event to a narrative point in the overarching story.

The third type of NPC's, which are more general in nature, "...populate the landscape and are often used to drive the story as well as offer side quests (requests or missions for the player to finish that do not necessarily relate directly to the overall game story)" (p.5-6). Finally, the enemy NPC's that are external to the antagonist of the game, serve to challenge the player in combat and are often used as a tool to provide rewards and skill/level upgrades.

Beginning with the role of the primary narrative characters, the storyline in *Fable II* is relatively linear, with each character coming into Sparrow's life at very specific moments used to move the plot forward. For example, the player (and Sparrow) is introduced to Theresa, the Seeress who acts as the prime source of information, in the very beginning of the game. When Sparrow begins her adult life after being nursed back to health by Theresa, she is given a Guild Seal which enables Theresa to communicate with Sparrow at any time and from any distance. Information transmitted through the seal cannot be interrupted or skipped by the player and is always 'character-specific' (Brusk & Björk, 2009); when Sparrow hears a woman's voice 'out of thin air', it is always only Theresa's and she has no choice but to listen. Consequently, the player has no choice but to listen as well, as there is rarely, if ever, an option to 'skip' dialogue transmitted in this manner.

As a player-character that is parentless, the player finds out in the first minutes of the game, Theresa can be perceived to fulfill a maternal role in the game. It was Theresa who nursed Sparrow back to health after Lord Lucien's attack and who prepares her for the epic battle. Regardless of her motives (which at times are quite unclear), Theresa guides Sparrow's actions over the course of the game and often acts as her moral compass.

The relationships that Sparrow has with each of the Heroes are not as clearly delineated. She spends the most time interacting with Sister Hannah. During their interactions, Sparrow is placed in a 'big sister' role, taking the lead in combat situations and listening to Hannah talk about her relationship with her father. Garth, the second hero, once helped Lord Lucien to build the Spire, but upon hearing of Lucien's intentions parted ways. Sparrow is introduced to him twice. Once when she was child as she entered Castle Fairfax, and again when she is sent to free him from the Spire. Although they must fight together to defeat Lucien, the interactions between Garth and Sparrow are few and far between, giving little insight to player as to any relationship between the two. Sparrow's interactions with Reaver are no more developed than the first two heroes. With only enough interaction to provide the player with a sense of Reaver's arrogance, it becomes obvious at times that their interactions are strained, but necessary. Overall, Sparrow's relationships with the Heroes have more of the sense of goal-driven purpose rather than heroic camaraderie and offers little insight into Sparrow's state of mind during gameplay. Sparrow's interactions with Lord Lucien are few throughout the game, but as the main antagonist, plays the principal role in giving purpose to the player's actions and ultimately defines the rationale behind the cumulative set of quests Sparrow embarks on.

With both primary and secondary narrative NPC's, Sparrow cannot actively engage in a two-way dialogue with any of them beyond initiating the conversation. This lack of actual interaction positions this set of characters as pure narrative tools. Player's can interact with general NPC's for a wide range of purposes, from ordering a drink in any of the local taverns to being assigned side-quests and jobs that can help Sparrow accumulate money, 'reknown' or items. Player's can also engage in a range of activities with these NPC's including dancing a little jig, flirting or even engaging in intimate relations. Player's can develop more extensive relationships with general NPC's such as starting a family, but all social interactions are limited to a preset selection of 'expressions' found in a menu accessible through the RB button (figure 32). The game begins with a preset selection of expressions, however, the player can find or earn more expressions throughout the game.



*Figure 32: Romantic Expression Wheel*

In spite of the fact that these relationships are intended to give depth to the player-character and to the game's narrative, the scope of interactions, again, are very limited. Players cannot engage in complex conversations with their spouse or talk about the facts of life with their children, flattening this potentially engaging experience. What's worse, the player-character's interactions with this level of NPC's does not affect the overarching storyline in any way. Unfortunately, the two levels of NPC interaction appear to be unrelated and do little to alter the narrative or enrich the overall player experience.

Ruch articulates this shortcoming in his article "Fable 2 as Simulation, Game and Narrative: A contest" (2010a) when he writes:

Albion extends far beyond what is required of the narrative involving Sparrow, Sparrow's sister, Theresa and Lucien, so much so that the world seems somehow divorced from the narrative, because there is so little effect of one on the other. This is most simply demonstrated by the seemingly innocuous fact...: the only NPC's that the player/character does not maintain a love/hate, attractive/ugly relationship with are those that are important to the narrative. The player is unable to interact with those major players in the same way as is possible with the hundreds of characters throughout the game (§ 26).

### **5.3.3 Player-Character/Game Environment**

While it is the player who controls the action in the game, the player learns to walk, run, swim, explore, fight, and forage through the body of the player-character. The player learns the gameworld not through their own, corporeal understanding of materiality, but

through the digitally coded peculiarities of the game environment. Furthermore, it is not only the player-character that is affected by the decisions of the player, but the game environment as well. The landscape is dynamic and fully interactive, and can reflect the identity of the player-character created through gameplay choices and moral decisions.

#### **5.3.3.1 (re)Learning Spatiality: Navigation & Geography**

The player learns how to navigate the gameworld first and foremost through discovering the buttons associated with the basic movements allocated to the game's control pad outlined in the accompanying booklet. *Fable II* has a very straightforward control schema for movement, simply push the left joystick forward and Sparrow will follow suit. Rotate the joystick to the left or right in any minute degree, and Sparrow will move in that direction. While this seems simple enough, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, the game's geography affects the player's movement, shift the camera angle with every pace taken up a set of stairs, or down a craggy hill, making it a bit more of a challenge than simply pushing the joystick. More often than not, the sensitivity of the joystick coupled with the coded physicality of the geography makes it a challenge to navigate smoothly across the game's terrain.

Although perhaps a challenge to physically navigate, the player-character is saved from potential danger as the game's design does not allow the player-character to navigate the game's environment feely. Boundaries, both obvious and invisible exist to guide the player-character. The world of Albion appears to be endless, with breathtaking vistas and wide open fields. But they are not there solely to create a fantastical world, but serve a

functional purpose as well. As explained by Hutchison in his article “Video Games and the Pedagogy of Place” (2007);

Landforms serve another function in video games: they often act as natural barriers that prevent players from venturing outside the boundaries of video game worlds. Mountains, cliffs, and large water bodies are common choices in this regard. Their use makes for a more authentic in-game experience than did the invisible walls that marked boundaries in older games (p. 36).

While partially true in the world of Albion, there are still invisible ‘walls’ that keep the player-character from going into certain places even though there are no visual barriers. For example, when the player-character approaches a cliff, they cannot simply continue to walk until they fall off the edge. In order to jump into water, the player is prompted to push the “A” button when Sparrow reaches the edge of the land. There is no in-game explanation or logic to this mechanic even though it can be rationally understood to be in place to prevent players from accidentally falling into the water and potentially interrupting the flow of gameplay.

Similarly, the visual scope of the geography does not reflect the played experience. Although the map displays one unified world, when navigating from one area to another, the player-character is faced with stopping in mid-stride as the console processes the information that they are crossing from one zone to another. Even though this sort of temporal delay makes sense within the fiction of the game when the player-character is ‘porting’ from one city to another, being faced with an invisible ‘zone wall’, the player is forced to reconsider the materiality of the game space.

Interestingly, when traveling from one destination to another in *Fable II*, the time it takes to travel is displayed on the bottom of the screen. This information is, of course, intended for the player, but it also aids in expanding the player's notion of time and space. Even if it only takes the player 10 minutes to travel across an area, when they hit the 'zone wall' they are informed of how much time it takes the player-character to arrive at the targeted destination.

For instance, on the Cullis Gate quest, Sparrow is off to meet "Hammer" at the Rookridge Inn. When she reaches the zone line at Oakfield, the player is informed that it is a 70 mile journey and will take 13 hours on foot. Of course, the player does not need to put in 13 real-time hours; a one-minute 'real-world' loading time essentially translates into a 13 hour journey. This specific recalculation of time and space is unique to the specificities of Albion and over time the player learns to calculate distance in terms of time, and player-skill, and not necessarily in terms of actually perceived geography.

In other situations, the exact opposite is true as the player learns to reconfigure their perception of space and distance through time traveled. Depending on the in-game terrain, what may appear to be a short distance, may take a long time to get there if the player has to avoid obstacles, climb mountains or swim across a lake. All of these things, while instigated by the gameworld, is actualized externally based on player skill and dexterity. These two positions can be aptly summarized as follows:

Although distance within the image of games ... is represented as a quantitative measure, consisting of the representation of meters and kilometres [miles] between points, the space of the image is traversed and



determined by the bodily coordinates of the user and their relationship with the avatar on the screen (Ash, 2009, p. 2113).

The fact that both time and distance can be altered depending on both internal and external factors works to complicate the player-character's relationship with the game environment, and furthermore, the player's understanding of this relationship.

## 5.4 Mediating Technology

The form, function, and materiality of the mediating technology including the console, controller, screen, and even the surrounding play space “crafts a particular play experience”<sup>23</sup> which is unique to every player and play session. To varying degrees, and depending on the context and game, each of these things have some impact on the way in the game is both played and perceived. Drawing on the specificity of my own gameplay experiences and more generalized literature on mediating technologies, the following section will briefly elucidate the ways in which gameplay is influenced by both the form and function of the game controller in the process of playing *Fable II*. As with the previous two games discussed in the previous two chapters, specific examples of *Fable II* were drawn from gameplay occurring exclusively on Microsoft's Xbox 360.

### 5.4.1 Controller

For all its potential complexity, it is with great happiness that I quickly learn that the control schema for *Fable II*, while making use of all of the available controls, is relatively

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<sup>23</sup> Quoted from a public lecture given at Concordia University on January 20, 2012 by Cindy Poremba, C titled *Play, performance, and aesthetic experience in the New Arcade*.

simple. “Good play”, after all, “is about feeling, and being able to feel what we are supposed to be feeling is, at least partly, a function of not looking at or thinking about our hands” (p. 131). Boasting a ‘one button’ attack mode – to melee attack, press the “X” button (the “Y” button for ranged weapons and the “B” button for casting spells) – the simplicity of the combat schema allows the player the freedom to concentrate on the events on the screen instead of focusing on the controller.

Although combat is actualized through a simple action that requires only the movement of the player’s thumb, both hands actively still grip the controller, encompassing it in its entirety. As enemies increase and combat intensifies, the player’s hands grip the controller harder as the player must push the “X” button faster. Even though the melee command requires little focus and physical effort, the player’s body tenses up in response to the increased speed of attack.

Kirkpatrick addresses this form of physicality in his article “Controller, Hand, Screen: Aesthetic form in the computer game” (2009) when he states that

... maneuvering through a labyrinth on the screen always involves digits pressing and muscles and tendons straining. A complex and dynamic forcefield is established in the palm, wrapped around the controller, and it is changes of pressure and tension here that help determine what happens in the game ... there is a formal continuity between the configuration of digits and the structured, dynamic action sequences in the program and on the screen (p. 133-134).

The connection between the player's physical actions performed on the controller have a direct correlation to the action represented on the screen even though there is no logical (physical) correlation between the pressing of a button and the act of swinging a sword. However, as Kirkpatrick explains, in the context of physically throwing a javelin and doing so via a controller "Something of the experience of throwing a javelin – its tensions in the body, its discipline, its conscious manipulation of weight and energies – gets condensed into the hand" (p. 134). Here, Kirkpatrick localizes the embodied physicality of the act of throwing into the hand in what he calls the "form of the action" (p. 134).

This notion can be taken one step further when considering not only the button pressing, but the entire material experience of holding the controller, the physical tension expressed through the holding of one's breath, and often, even the gaping mouth in intense moments. So while the pressing of a singular button may not mimic the swinging of the sword or represent the full combat experience, the pressure and tensions produced from the gripping of the controller can be said to mimic the physical tension of gripping the handle of a sword or the handle of a pistol. Combined with the bodily manifestations that occur above and beyond the controller, it can be said that the act of pushing that one singular button has a much larger role in connecting the player's body to the body of the player-character through the mediating technology of the controller.

Another physical aspect of the controller that influences the player experience is the increase use of "force feedback technology (haptics)" which is said to "enhance(s) the game experience by creating a more realistic physical feeling of playing a game" (Orozco, Silva, El Saddik, & Petriu, 2012 p. 218). Haptic feedback, in its Xbox 360 incarnation, is

manifested through a rumbling or vibration through the controller. Occurring most often in combat, this vibration is intended to intensify the player's sense of being in (or at least part of) the gameworld.

In its current state, the feedback provided is currently a 'one size fits all' sensation. Regardless of the specific action on the screen, if the game is designed to give feedback at particular moments of gameplay, it will always be (in its current state) transmitted in the form of vibrations sent through the controller. Of course, there is often varying degrees of intensity, but the feeling of vibration is still the same. While the sensorial feedback may inform the player when they've made contact in combat, the fact that the same vibrations also represent a glowing orb. For example, when swinging a sword and making contact with another sword, a person may expect to feel a quick metallic "clink" resonate down the blade and into the handle. This could potentially be transmitted as an abrupt forced feedback, but instead, in *Fable II*, it is conveyed as a long, intense vibration more akin to the firing of a machine gun.

Even more confusing, this same vibration can occur during non-combat moments of gameplay. During a short cut-scene when Sparrow is near the Spire, which has a large glowing light that spans the height of the Spire, the controller starts to vibrate. The first time this occurred, I didn't quite understand why, until I was informed that it was meant to represent the power emitting from the glowing light. Even after knowing why the controller was vibrating, it didn't make logical sense that it would be the same feeling as when Sparrow was in combat. In the end, instead of immersing me in the gameworld, it was, at times, jarring and disruptive to the fiction.

## 5.5 Thinking about Identity

While most videogame genres offer some level of character progression, role-playing games, by their very nature, are structured around character creation, meaningful development, statistical and often complex narrative progression. The player does not get to choose which character they would like to play in *Fable II* (they do get to choose the player-character's gender). However, they are responsible for making gameplay choices aimed at progressing the character on an extensive level. *Fable II* is set within a linear narrative which frames the player's gameplay and the range of their available options. Although the player has the ability to mould the player-character and their choices impact the gameworld, these do not overtly alter the game's overarching storyline.

Based on the gameplay and design aspects of the game delineated in the individual sections of this chapter coupled with critical reflections, the following section aims to briefly discuss the levels to which *Fable II* facilitates projective, discovered, and hybrid-identity. Finally, I will reassess the existing framework to determine its value as an analytical tool for single-player role-playing games, and make any adjustments to the framework accordingly.

### 5.5.1 Projective Identity

Although the player enters the gameworld through a pre-created character with a set narrative background, *Fable II* is designed with almost endless opportunities for the player to develop Sparrow along their own desired trajectory. From playing the game linearly, following only the primary quests that progresses the scripted narrative, to spending countless hours doing side quests (that typically do not impact the primary narrative) and

interacting with NPC's, taking up jobs, or even starting a family, *Fable II* offers the player a structured yet seemingly boundless environment through which they can develop identity in countless ways.

Starting the game through the eyes of a young child, the player makes moral decisions from the beginning of the game. Early choices are easy; steal alcohol for an itinerant or help a man catch the Deeds that blew away. It is up to the player to decide what path Little Sparrow will take in life. While seemingly simple, the ethical dilemmas increase in complexity as the game progresses. Throughout the course of the game, the moral decisions become much harder, deciding to kill a guard with whom you've become friends (which helps Sparrow in that particular narrative situation) or deciding to spare his life (which results in negative consequences within the game) – but it is purely up to the player to decide which path Sparrow will take.

The choice to become good or evil, to play along the lines of purity or corruption, or simply trying to maintain some sort of balance comes almost completely from within the player and are projected onto the player-character. Each choice the player makes alters the gameworld and player-character cumulatively over time. Making decisions that are aligned with evil and corruption will result in culturally associative representations of evil such as sickly skin, rotten teeth, dark hair and red eyes. Aligning with good and purity, the player-character develops along the lines of how goodness is represented in Western culture; fair skin, clear complexion and blue eyes.

Although the actions and identities created reside within the confines of the game, the player must still internalize the outcomes of their actions and decide how to proceed in

based on both desired and expected actions and potential reactions from the game. For example, knowing that whatever decision they makes, there is an in-game repercussion, the player must balance the value of their decision against the result of the action. Arguably, the game also projects its values and desires onto the player. Following Goffman (1959):

When we allow that the individual projects a definition of the situation when he appears before others, we must see that the others, however passive their role may seem to be, will themselves effectively project a definition of the situation by virtue of their response to the individual and by virtue of any lines of action they initiate to him (p. 9).

If we recontextualize this statement to replace a human to human interaction with a human to gameworld (including but not exclusive to the player-character) interaction, we can infer that the gameworld projects its designed values through the responses it gives the players as a reaction to their actions. Indeed, the game is embedded with values – evil is represented by sickly, unhealthy imagery, red eyes and devil horns (at the extreme end of the spectrum), whereas good choices are ‘rewarded’ by positive imagery. While the player is free to make their choice on any side of the alignment (and anywhere in between), it is very clear what the game’s embedded values are. These values are projected onto the player for them to internalize, contemplate, and respond to with their own set of values and desires.

The definition of projective identity follows that the decisions the player makes comes from within themselves and reflects their real-world values and beliefs as they are actualized through the player-character. In a virtual environment with no real-world consequences, it may also be perceived as a safe space in which a player can explore

alternative projected versions of self. The decisions always originate from within and are guided by the player, they are manifested through the game and represented through the player-character (and game environment). However, the player can still test out alternate selves and learn through virtual consequences and outcomes.

Ultimately, learning through projection is the primary goal of Gee's (2003) theory of projective identity in videogame play. Through the projection of values and desires onto a virtual character, the player can develop and reinforce current existing versions of the player's self, or explore different modes of being. The player can learn through the outcome of their actions, whichever path they choose. According to Gee,

If a player takes on ... a projective identity vis-à-vis the virtual character he or she is playing in a game, this constitutes a form of identification with the virtual character's world, story, and perspectives that become a strong learning device at a number of different levels. This is because, in taking on a projective identity, the player projects his or her own hopes, values, and fears onto the virtual character that he or she is co-creating with the video game's designers. Doing this allows the player to imagine a new identity born at the intersection of the player's real-world identities and the virtual identity of the character he or she is playing in the game. In turn, this projective identity helps speak to, and possibly transform, the player's hopes, values, and fears (p. 199-200).

The potential for projection varies depending on how structured the gameworld is. In a single-player narratively driven game like *Fable II*, players can project identity not only



through imposing values and hopes onto the player-character, but also through aesthetic choices that inform the gameworld who Sparrow is as imagined by the player. This can be done through a range of player-character customization options offered in the gameworld such as hairstyles, clothing, dyes for clothing and even tattoos.

Finally, projective identity can occur through the development of alternative desired narratives. While the player can forge through the game practically avoiding engagement with the gameworld beyond that which is necessary to progress the scripted narrative, they can also spend countless hours exploring not only the gameworld via its geography but also through interacting with its population. From the ability to engage in (sexual) activity with prostitutes to starting a family, the player can project a desired layer of narrative to compliment (or even contradict) Sparrow's life as a hero. In many ways, the world is the player's proverbial oyster. Of course, the player may choose to base their gameplay decisions on who they believe Sparrow, the pre-scripted character to be, and develop her along her own hopes, values, and beliefs.

### **5.5.2 Discovered Identity**

As a role-playing game that begins with a pre-determined character set within a pre-scripted, linear storyline, the player not only develops Sparrow through gameplay choices, but they equally discover the player-character's identity as gameplay unfolds. Contrary to the core of projective identity, which derives from within the player and is projected onto the player-character and gameworld, discovered identity derives from the game itself.

Within the first few minutes of the game, the player learns that Little Sparrow and her sister Rose are orphans living in Bowerstone Old Town. You learn that they dream of

someday changing their ways of life and finding something better, and that she is genetically one of the “Heroes”. Beginning the game as a young child lays the foundation for discovered identity to be a core aspect of *Fable II*. While the player does not know Sparrow’s whole story – neither does she. Both the player and Sparrow discover who she is and what their goals are at the same time as Theresa communicates pertinent narrative information to Sparrow throughout the game. These interactions work to not only to contextualize the gameplay for the player, it simultaneously works to uncover Sparrow’s identity.

Since Sparrow pre-exists the player with an identity and destiny already in place, the base character is the same for all players, as such all players discover the same aspects of Sparrow’s scripted self. While the player has a hand in developing Sparrow’s identity through gameplay choices, it is done so within a prescribed set of choices. For example, the player could not decide to befriend a cat instead of a dog, or have no dog at all. Having a canine companion is part of the prescribed narrative that the player discovers early on in the game and is given no other choice. From this perspective, the player is never in complete control of the game. However, role-playing games are unique in that while they are set within a scripted environment, the narrative progression and development is dependent on the player in a more involved way than other video game genres. Beyond the scripted aspects of the game, the player embarks on a quest to discover not only the narrative aspects of Sparrow, but also on her potentiality. Discovering her talents, her skills, and extra-narrative aspects is also part of the process of gameplay. This is to say that the player not only discovers the pre-existing version of Sparrow, much like an individual discovering

their self-identity through experimentation and exploration of their potential selves (Breger, 1974; Subrahmanyam & Šmahel, 2011; Turkle, 1995), but as the player makes gameplay choices outside of the primary narrative structure, they are combined with the scripted version of Sparrow which inevitably creates an amalgamated version of Sparrow for the player to discover and reconsider in future decisions.

### 5.5.3 Hybrid-Identity

While *Fable II* offers a fixed narrative structure that the player can follow through in a relatively linear fashion simply to “finish” the game, the amount of secondary content affords the player more freedom to develop the player-character into a unique entity that has the potential to stand apart from any other version of Sparrow developed by another player. The amount of secondary content in the game also exponentially expands gameplay sessions that may or may not feed directly into the primary storyline. The relationship between the player and the player-character grows through increased commitment over time in a way that is not as present in other genres (Boudreau, 2007; Waggoner, 2009; Zhao, 2008).

Between moments of discovered and projected identity, between the designed and played game, Sparrow lies within the space in which hybrid-identity emerges. The result of the player’s cumulative (inter)actions with the game, in all its capacity, is largely dependent on individual play styles and focus. All players enter Albion through the same scripted Hero, yet no two players can create an identical version over the course of any given gameplay session. Each version of Sparrow is stored on the player’s Xbox 360. Every time the player logs in to play *Fable II*, they are confronted with the stored version of the player-

character; they are faced with a new iteration of Sparrow through which they must (re)negotiate their player perspective, and (re)consider the hybrid-identity moving forward.

An important aspect of hybrid-identity is the ability for it to be more than fleeting. It does not necessarily need to be stable – identity rarely is (Burke, 2003) – but it needs to be materialized in some way that the player can recognize it as something distinctly separate from themselves and separate from the designed player-character. In *Fable II*, this materialization can also be found in online co-op gameplay. During co-operative gameplay, players exist in a shared gameworld. While not avatars themselves (the other players are reduced to being a purple orb), the identities that exist between each player and their player-character are performed and externalized through the ability to click on one another and inspect the other player's actualized Sparrow.

This exchange of identity works to materialize the hybrid-identity, since both players embody the same base player-character – Sparrow, however, their 'versions' of player-created Sparrows will differ through individualized player choices. These cumulative choices create a hybrid-identity between the player and the player-character. When one player inspects another, they can see this hybrid-identity even though they are technically only looking at the player-character. There are characteristics / traits that define the particular relationship between the other player and Sparrow that will not be replicated when inspecting any other orb. In this context, and in that moment of inspection, the player-character becomes a momentarily stable, visual representation of hybrid-identity.

## 5.6 Conclusions: Reading the Framework

The foundational framework used to structure the gameplay analysis throughout this chapter was originally developed through MMOG gameplay. As *Fable II* is a single-player role playing game, the initial categories remain relatively stable. However, the extent to which the categories are fulfilled differ. As role-playing games in general, and *Fable II* specifically, offers the players a vast gameworld to explore and perform a wide range of secondary actions in, any analysis beyond the completion of the primary storyline is widely variant on the player themselves. As such, the following conclusions are based my own gameplay (a total of 42 hours) as detailed throughout this chapter in conjunction with designed expectations, that is to say, the expectations of interaction as determined by the design features of the game. With the understanding that anyone interested in playing an RPG, a minimal amount of creative gameplay can be assumed in considering a more generalized conclusion.

There is only the default difficulty level in the game. With unlimited ammunition, and spells that cost no magic to cast, combat, while frequent when following the narratively structured gameplay, is relatively simple. No matter how many enemies Sparrow is faced with, she always comes out victorious, even if she is knocked unconscious (there is no actual death) many times, victory is almost always inevitable. Considering the ease of combat throughout the game, even in what are supposed to be epic ‘boss’ fights, it can be inferred that the combat aspect of the game is really a secondary feature of gameplay with the primary focus being the development of the player-character, the exploration of the

gameworld, and the opportunity actively engage with non-playing characters. This becomes evident when looking at the gameplay through the lens of the foundational framework.

As a definitive feature of role-playing games, the *player/player-character* relationship is the primary focus of gameplay. Without the ability to create the player-character completely, the player is charged with developing the character within the pre-set narrative context of the game. Given a wide range of moral choices that influence gameplay and aesthetic choices that do not, but that act as markers of identity, the extent to which the player interacts with and develops the player-character will, in large part, determine the extent to which hybrid-identity has the potential to emerge. A player that chooses to develop Sparrow solely on the side of function with the unitary goal of completing the quests necessary to advance the overarching storyline will inevitably have a less potential to develop hybrid-identity as a player who opts for extensive character development beyond the primary narrative.

Considering the *player-character/non-playing character* relationship, the same variance can be seen in the extent to which the player-character interacts with non-playing characters. As described earlier in this chapter, there are several levels of NPC's that play different roles in the narrative and character development. Players can choose to interact primarily with NPC's who are integral to the scripted storyline, but this limits the gameplay experience, and ultimately limits the potential for hybrid-identity to emerge. Understanding that to fully experience all that the world of Albion has to offer, players are strongly encouraged to play beyond the scripted storyline and explore the designed potential for creating secondary narratives. Doing so will inherently expand the potential for hybrid-

identity to emerge, and possibly enrich the overall gameplay experience. Unfortunately, the game design offers little in the way of meaningful incentives to interact with NPC's extensively beyond an individual desire to experience the gameworld to the fullest extent.

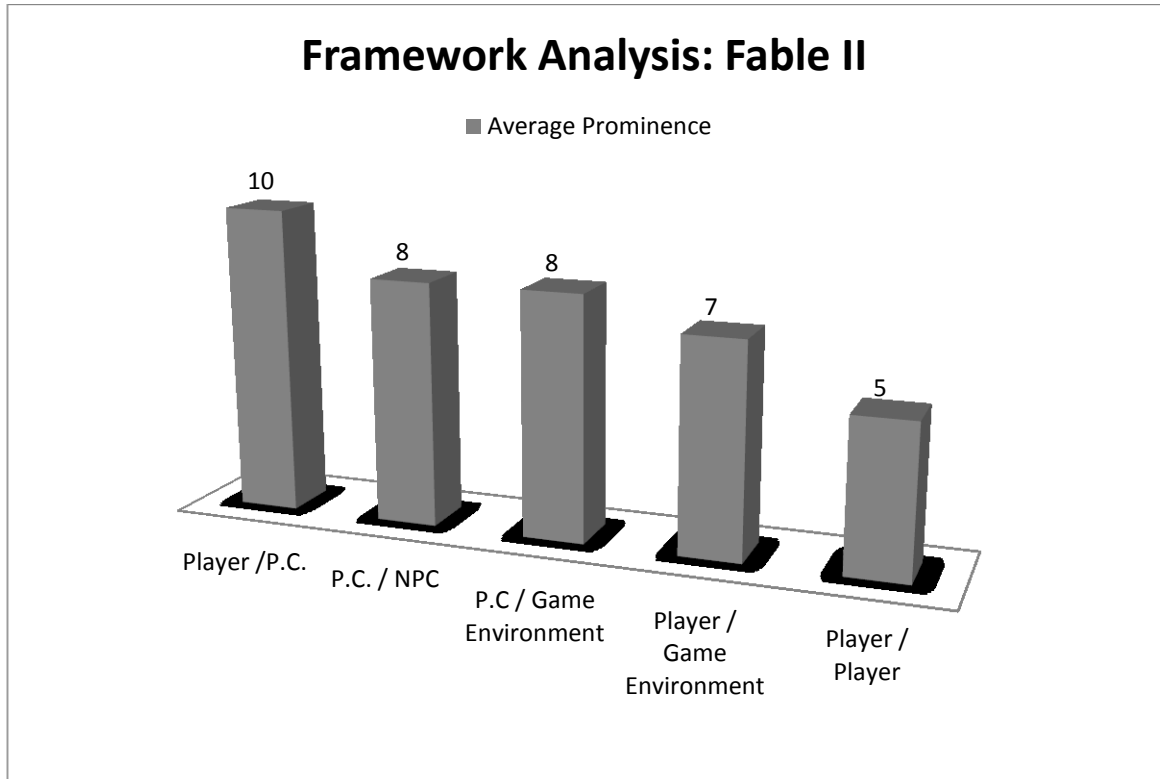
As role-playing games inherently incorporate the materiality of the gameworld beyond simple geography, the *player-character/game environment* relationship is heavily connected to the first two relationships and plays a central role in enriching the RPG experience. From understanding spatiality through interacting with the geography from within the designed boundaries of the player-character's body, to having Sparrow's moral alignment reflected in the gameworld, *Fable II*'s design incorporates a high level of potential *player-character/game environment* interactions that, coupled with the *player/player-character* and *player-character/non-playing character* create a multi-dimensional gameworld that goes beyond the narrative structure.

The *player/game-environment*, while essentially tied to the *player-character/game environment*, broadens the scope of information available beyond that which would be accessible to the player-character solely through the fiction of the game. From informing the player how NPC's perceive them to quest logs and artefacts that give the player additional information, expansive menus enable the player to have a richer understanding of the mechanics of gameplay outside of the immediate gameworld which, in turn, influences the ways in which the player experiences the immediate narrative gameworld. The game environment acts not only as space for the action to occur, it is also a fully functionally interactive aspect of the game. The player doesn't just play 'in' Albion, they play 'with it' as well.

Finally, *Fable II* has a *player/player* component, but as a two player co-operative feature it offers a different experience than the *player/player* relationship an in MMOG which relies on the interactions with many players collectively as its primary source of gameplay. Compounded by the fact that co-op mode is offered as downloadable content, not all players will choose to play the game in co-op mode. Even if they do, the inequality of gameplay, from rewards to character development, heavily alters the experience for the secondary player. As such, online or co-located, the *player/player* relationship is an external factor not central to the primary single-player analysis.

If we consider each category in the framework and evaluate their prominence in gameplay (figure 33), on a scale of zero to ten as described in chapter two for the purpose of visualization, we can see that the *player/player-character* (PC in chart below) relationship is the most dominant category in gameplay. Whereas, the *player-character/non-player character* (PC / NPC in chart), and the *player/game environment* categories are just slightly less prominent and are equal to each other. Followed closely by the *player/game environment* relationship. Finally, I assigned the *player/player* relationship a midrange a neutral prominence of 5/10 since it does have the potential to influence gameplay for those who choose to expand their gameplay in that direction. I did not factor it into my overall consideration in regards to the potential for the emergence of hybrid-identity in *Fable II* gameplay.





**Figure 33: Fable II Framework Distribution**

It has been demonstrated throughout this chapter that there are high levels of *player/player-character*, *player-character/non-playing character*, and *player-character /game environment* interactions which actively contribute to a high potential for the emergence of hybrid-identity to occur, and within certain contexts it may even exist as a tangible identity between the player and the player-character. It should be noted that the extent to which a player develops their player-character and interacts with the gameworld will be as varied as the players themselves and as such, so will the potential for the emergence of hybrid-identity.

## Chapter 6 : The Focus of Gameplay

Over the course of the last three chapters, it has been demonstrated that between play and design lies the potential for different types of identities to develop and emerge in varying degrees. The type and extent of the development is dependent on a range of factors that contribute to the process of videogame play. However, not all games provide the necessary conditions for hybrid-identity to materialize. In single-player videogames, it is often fleeting and is as varied as the players, game titles, genres, and play contexts it emerges from. In order to understand the ways in which identity is developed in videogame play, it is necessary to look beyond just the player and their relationship with the player-character and include the external factors that contribute to the process.

Following Taylor's (2009) notion of assemblage, the process of play is not limited to the *player/player-character* interactions. It includes (but is not limited to) interactions with and within the gameworld as well as with the technology that mediates the play. Gameplay, and the identities it affords, is a recursive, networked process. The framework outlined in chapter two was created to focus on various elements within the play process. The three case studies aimed to distinguish the extent to which each aspect of the framework factored into the emergence and development of different identities across three select genres.

It should be reiterated here that the elements within the current framework are meant to be used as a guideline for analysis and are not meant to be exhaustive. Rather, part of the goal of the framework is to illuminate areas that are missing elements which make up each particular play context. Different types of games or genres may require the

consideration of different elements that are more pertinent to the play process as was demonstrated in the conclusion of chapters three and four.

The use of the framework as an analytical tool served two distinct purposes. Firstly, to deconstruct gameplay through the different types of interaction that occur during gameplay and to reveal necessary subcategories that were added to the framework as needed in the previous three chapters. These categories were then applied to the analysis to determine their impact on the emergence of different types of identities. Secondly, the framework served to homogenize the specificities of different genres, facilitating a broader comparative analysis.

The immersive close-analysis of each game made it possible to deconstruct and focus on the complex networked process of gameplay which includes more than just the interactions between the player and the player-character. Viewed collectively, it is possible to begin to disentangle to individual specificities of a particular game title from the more general aspects of gameplay that contribute to identity development and the potential for hybrid-identity to emerge.

Acknowledging that gameplay is an inherently networked process that includes many contributing factors, it is therefore essential to look beyond the player-centric perspective of gameplay and identity. While the player is part of play process, they are not the sole contributor. Drawing on the gameplay examples from the analyses of *Mirror's Edge*, *Alone in the Dark*, and *Fable II* found in the previous three chapters, this chapter will illustrate that identity does not always solely originate from or necessarily reside in the player. By considering these three games together, I have identified three distinct foci of

gameplay: player-centric, player-character-centric, and the game-centric gameplay (which includes the mediating technology that facilitates gameplay).

In moving beyond a completely player-centric approach to understanding gameplay and identity in videogames, it will be possible to work towards comprehending the complex networked process of the possible emergence of identity in single-player videogame play. By highlighting the different elements within the process and foci of gameplay, this chapter will work to establish a set of analytical tools and vocabulary that will allow for a more nuanced discussion on the processes of gameplay and understand how they relate to different forms of identity in single-player videogames. It should be noted that this chapter aims to articulate the processes of gameplay that contribute to the potential emergence of different identities as well as hybrid-identity.

## 6.1 Player-centric play

While videogames exist as discreet artefacts, the act of gameplay necessarily includes the active engagement of the player. ‘Player-centric’ play focuses on, or privileges the player as the central source and purpose of action. Different design elements contribute to this type of gameplay such as player ability, point-of-view, and varying types of control. This type of gameplay facilitates player-centric identities such as projective identity, and has the potential to affect the player outside of the confines of the game.

Although game design necessarily focuses on a generalized ‘ideal’ or ‘imagined’ player, when looking at the process of identity construction in gameplay it is imperative to consider the individualized experiences as well. Waggoner exemplifies this in his book *My Avatar, My Self: Identity in video role-playing games* (2009) as he offers personal play

experiences of multiple respondents which are used to posit a more generalized theory on role-playing games and identity. While analysis of all three games focused the gameplay of one player – myself –, the ‘player’ was not a stable category as some of the more designed aspects of gameplay were. With each play session, my skill set within and across the games grew. Even though I remained constant as the only player in the framework analyses, the conditions of my contribution to gameplay changed during every sitting and evolved over time; the player that I was at the beginning of the research and the player I became are categorically two different players. My identity as a player was altered through the gameplay experience. Beginning my research as a novice console gamer, after over 120 hours of cumulative gameplay, intermediate console gamer is now part of my identity. This transformation through gameplay is true of any player regardless of their status as a novice or as an expert. As such, it should be understood that the ‘player’ perspective is a constantly shifting one which perpetually alters the gameplay experience and analysis.

Drawing on my played experiences from *Mirror's Edge*, *Alone in the Dark*, and *Fable II* and focusing on game design elements culled from employing the framework as an analytic lens, the following section will look at specific elements that enable, encourage, or enhance player-centric identity.

### **6.1.1 Player-ability**

Through the act of gameplay, the player develops skills and competencies which contribute to a constant reframing of the play experience. One of the most apparent areas where this can be seen is in the tutorial, or opening sequences of a game. All three games begin with a short cinematic that leads directly into some level of interactive gameplay.

However, while all games begin with an interactive element, they all differ in context and purpose, resulting in different experiences for the player.

For example, *Mirror's Edge* offers the player a very traditional gameplay tutorial, appropriately titled 'training'. In a short sequence justified by the narrative as the player-character Faith needing to brush up on her skills before heading off on her first mission, the player is assigned a series of tasks to complete before they can move on to the content of the game. Each task is designed to teach the player the basic skills for navigation; running, jumping, sliding, etc. During this sequence, the player is not only given the information on how to move and navigate across the cityscape, but they must successfully complete the task as well in order to continue. Failure to do so results in the game resetting Faith back to the starting point of the set task and the player must try again. There is no meaningful consequence to the player's failure in the tutorial other than the inability to access the primary game content. The reward is simply to be allowed to play the game.

On the one hand, this very overt type of tutorial gives the player the time and tools needed to be able to play the game without necessarily being penalized during the learning experience while acting to conceal the player's learning curve into the context of the tutorial. The player has time to develop their skills in this 'safe' training space. On the other hand, it might be frustrating to not be able to engage in the formal game directly, if say, the player understands the controls that are being taught, even if they may lack the dexterity to successfully complete the training task in that moment. Ultimately, this type of controlled tutorial is a way for the game to manage the minimally required skill set necessary for gameplay. The player cannot enter the game proper without proving to the game that they

have the skills. There is a very clear sense that the tutorial is for the player, as it has no impact on the game or its narrative. Simply stated, the tutorial is all about the player.

Where *Mirror's Edge*'s tutorial aims to arm the player with the necessary basic movements (from jumping to disarmament) to be successful throughout the game<sup>24</sup>, *Alone in the Dark* and *Fable II* both ease the player into the game slowly, only sharing information necessary to progress through the immediate situation. Although this method is often said to be more interactive, possibly leading to a deeper player-experience (Cheng, 2007) as the player is given less information initially, it potentially contributes to a steeper learning curve. Yet this slow divulgence of information can work equally towards instilling a sense exploration and discovery for the player that aids in unifying the player to the player-character, potentially affecting the overall gameplay experience.

*Alone in the Dark* throws the player right into gameplay from the opening sequence. Tasked with making their way to the rooftop, the player is shown how to navigate the player-character, Edward, and blink through showing the correlated controller button as a pop-up on the screen. Failure to complete the set task has little impact on the player-character or the narrative other than resetting the sequence and slowing down the narrative development. Despite the fact that the player enters the game immediately, they are not put in any immediate danger and do not encounter any combat situations in the opening sequence.

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<sup>24</sup> While the player is taught a range of moves during the tutorial, they are not taught *every* move they will need during the course of the game.

This type of introduction, while not as overtly handholding as *Mirror's Edge's* closed tutorial, still takes the player into consideration by easing them into the action and giving them extra-diegetic information. The interactive opening sequence acts to introduce the player to Edward within the context of the game in a way that connects the player to the player-character directly by enabling instant control. But the game establishes a distance between the two from the very beginning by instructing the player directly through the use of the pop-ups. Mainly, the introduction balances the focus on both the player and the player-character.

*Fable II* has the most meaningfully interactive beginning of the three, by giving the player tasks that have an impact on the unfolding of the narrative, development of the player-character, and ultimately influences future gameplay, albeit on a minor scale. The first few minutes of gameplay act as both an introduction to the game's narrative and allows the player a safe space to learn the controls and feel comfortable with navigation in an open environment. While the player is given the task of finding five gold – a quest they must complete in order for the story to continue, whether they steal or do good deeds to collect the coins is wholly up to the player. As such, the player not only gets to hone their player ability (learning the control schema, etc.) in a safe game environment, they are also given the occasion to explore different alignments (good or evil) vicariously through the player-character, Sparrow from the very beginning of the game.

With little information transmitted directly to the player, the focus of the opening sequences are on Sparrow and the narrative almost exclusively. Instead of being a tutorial for the player, the first few minutes of gameplay is interspersed with interactive cinematics



where the main goal is to establish the narrative and set Sparrow's role within it. While the player is given the opportunity to learn how to navigate within the gameworld and given small quests to familiarize themselves with the game, there is no explicit focus on instructing the player. Fundamentally, the beginning of *Fable II* is all about Sparrow and how her story begins.

Comparatively, *Mirror's Edge* was the most explicit in distinguishing the line between the player and the player-character. Even though the player controlled Faith during the 'training' session, it was very clear that this portion of the game was designed for the player as the game guarded entry to the game proper. Both *Alone in the Dark* and *Fable II* offered the player immediate access to the gameplay. They both presented the player with explicit instructions through pop-ups intended solely for the purpose of the player. However, the content and frequency of the pop-ups differed. In *Alone in the Dark*, the player was taught initial control commands that did not appear after the first sequence of gameplay. Whereas *Fable II* offered little in the way of initial instructional information from the beginning beyond what was offered throughout the entire game, most notably, the pop-up of the green "A" button when the player approached an interactive object or NPC or the appearance of the golden directional path. Depending on the player, their play-style, and their pre-existing ability, each game offers the player a different type introductory experience that has the potential to unify or segregate the player from the player-character.

### **6.1.2 Point-of-View/Perspective**

The point-of-view of the game is what truly pulls the player into the gameworld of any given game. Whether it's a first-person perspective where the action occurs through the

eyes of the player, third-person perspective where the player is able to see the player-character perform the actions, or a combination of both, the point-of-view situates the player's view of the gameworld as well as sets up their relationship to the player-character. Arguably, first-person point-of-view is most closely linked to player-centric identity compared to third person. In a first-person perspective, the player situated to appear as though the action is happening to them. Whereas a third-person point-of-view situates the player outside of the player-character, decentralizing the locus of action on the screen. While this externalization posits the player in the role of treating the player-character as a prosthetic, it also allows them to experience the game vicariously through another.

The differences are highlighted when comparing the point-of-view in *Mirror's Edge* to that of *Fable II*. *Mirror's Edge* is played in first-person perspective, seeing only Faith's arms and legs during gameplay. Faith's eyes and viewpoint are unified with the player's, making the player's interactions with the game world more immediate (Lim & Reeves, 2009). When running over the rooftops, the player they can see her feet jutting out at the bottom of the screen or watch as her hands reach out to grab onto an overhead beam. Yet, even though the player is conscious that the hands and feet belong to Faith, because the camera is fixed to represent the player's perspective, the ability for the player to perform as if it is themselves in the gameworld becomes easier. While the arms and legs represent Faith, they also act to pull the player into the gameworld visually extending the player's body through that of the player-character's. Hardly ever seeing Faith in her entirety (except for cut-scenes), she situates the player-perspective, framing the view of the gameworld as the player navigates the labyrinth of corridors and rooftops.

This is in complete opposition to the point-of-view in *Fable II* which, while there are moments that can be played in first-person, is predominantly through a third-person perspective. This creates a clear separation between the player and Sparrow. While the player's manipulation of the controller is actively represented through her movements, the movements are distinctively hers. This establishes a separation between the player and Sparrow. Much as it may be construed that this distance hinders *the player/player-character* relationship, it offers the player an opportunity to make gameplay choices they may not otherwise have made had they been playing in a first-person perspective. The distance creates a safe space between the player and the player-character. The actions are Sparrow's, not the player's, as such, the player can perform 'as' Sparrow, make choices based on her character.

Perspective does not always dictate the *player/player-character* relationship in the same manner. Although *Alone in the Dark* is played in third-person, the player is ever-conscious of Edward as an external body and being separate from themselves, but not in the same capacity as Sparrow. Edward is a heavily scripted character, with set actions within a very linear narrative. The player can only fulfill the actions prescribed by the game's design if they are to complete the game. There is little, to no room for the player 'play' with who Edward is or who he might be; there is no opportunity for the player to explore any other alternative identity other than Edward's as defined by the game. In this manner, the third-person perspective acts to demarcate the separation between player and player-character.

The same point-of-view can offer two very different play experiences and serve completely different functions. In *Mirror's Edge*, the player spends the entire game in the

first-person (excluding cut-scenes). As previously mentioned, it frames the player's perspective and structures the player experience. In figure 34, we see Faith's body, as if she is looking down. By keeping the gameplay in first-person, over time, this comes to feel as though the player is the one looking down.



*Figure 34: Faith's body in first-person perspective*

In *Alone in the Dark*, the dominant point-of-view is third-person. Even when the player opts to use the first-person perspective, the player usually only sees Edward's hands. Yet, when the player accesses the inventory screen, they are forced into a headless first-person perspective showing Edward's body akin to Faith's in figure 34 illustrated below in figure 35.



*Figure 35: Alone in the Dark inventory screen in first-person perspective*

Although it is an interesting way to incorporate the inventory menu into the game directly, the use of first-person perspective in *Alone in the Dark* is not congruent with the

context of the gameplay that otherwise enforces a visual separation between the player and the player-character. Even if the perspectives are identical, the point-of-view in *Mirror's Edge* is in line with the perspective used throughout the game, its use in *Alone in the Dark* attempts to put the player in Edward's shoes (or body), but after playing the majority of the game in third-person, this viewpoint.

The point-of view in each of the three games offer the player different levels of engagement and as a result, each present the player with a different opportunities to perform identity. In *Mirror's Edge*, the player is able to play through Faith. Even though Faith's character (and identity) is predetermined, without the burden of being visually reminded of her as an external being, the player has the potential to embody the role of Faith and experience the gameworld 'through' her perspective. *Fable II* separates the player visually from the player-character through the use of the third-person perspective, but through generic conventions briefly detailed in chapter two, even though she bears a pre-scripted identity, the player's gameplay choices work to evolve Sparrow as a character. The player engages 'with' Sparrow. Finally, using the same point-of view as *Fable II* but to a different end, *Alone in the Dark* actively separates the player from the player-character, Edward. A concretely predetermined character with his own identity, the player can only engage in the gameworld 'as' Edward.

### 6.1.3 Control

Whereas the notion of control is broad and can derive from the player, the player-character, or the game itself, this section will look at levels of player-centric control in each of the three games. This includes control over the player-character in a navigational sense

(during gameplay, cut-scenes, etc.) as well as in a developmental sense (character progression, enhancements, etc). Finally, this section will address the level of control a player may (or may not) have over the game's narrative.

The most fundamental level of control for the player in all games, *Mirror's Edge*, *Alone in the Dark*, and *Fable II* notwithstanding, is the extent to which they have the ability to move the player-character in and through the gameworld. Different games afford different levels of control as is clearly illustrated by comparing these three games. In *Mirror's Edge*, the player has a very basic level of control within the game. While the player can make Faith run, jump, roll, shimmy and slide at the push of a few buttons, they can only perform the actions as they are directly necessary for gameplay. There is little room to control Faith in ways that are not inherently functional within the game's narrative. Likewise, in *Alone in the Dark*, Edward is also confined to his functional, narratively driven movements, albeit with a broader catalogue (Edward can drive as well). The player cannot exert their own agency beyond what the game prescribes.

*Mirror's Edge* and *Alone in the Dark* are also comparable in terms of the amount of control the player has over both the development of the games' respective player-characters; namely, none. The character that the player enters the game with is ultimately the same character that they end it with, with the exception of Edward's inventory. In the same vein, there is little in the way of player influence over each game's narrative. *Mirror's Edge* offers the player a very linear, one-dimensional storyline. Each navigational step leads in the same narrative direction; there are no alternative story arcs, no branches for the player to explore. Although *Alone in the Dark* has a more complex narrative, and the player

is able to enter the it out of order through the DVD style menu system described in chapter four, the player can still only affect the narrative in a linear fashion. While the player has the final choice in which of two endings they select, the overall narrative development is purely pre-determined.

*Fable II* offers the player a wider range of control on all accounts. The player has more freedom to navigate throughout the gameworld. Although all movement is necessarily determined by the game's design, not all moves are instrumental to immediate gameplay and narrative advancement. There is ample room for the player to explore and perform actions solely for the sake of doing so. There are two avenues of narrative control in the game. The scripted plot that gives the game its context and the alternative storyline the player has the potential to create if they choose to invest the time.

Interestingly, the types of player control differ for each level of narrative gameplay. When the player follows the scripted story, the player's actions are funnelled in one direction. Of course, this is necessary to some extent in a single-player game so that the game's designers can create a relatively homogenous experience across all players. The player can only access the primary narrative in a pre-determined order. Similar to *Alone in the Dark* there are no alternative, scripted story arcs, but the player is also faced with a moral choice at the end that leads to one of two possible conclusions. The secondary, or player-created, narrative is wholly left up to the player, and decisions regarding this level of interaction have no bearing on the primary storyline.

In thinking about identity that emerges from player-centric gameplay, while it would appear that the player has limited control within all three games, the player is still,

ultimately in control of the gameplay, no matter how hard the games try to direct the player through a particular path. While *Mirror's Edge* may have only one ending, the player can spend numerous hours in the game simply wandering around. Similarly, in *Alone in the Dark*, the player may choose to explore every corner of central park. They may have to fight off a few enemies, but nothing forces the player to follow the narrative to the end. Finally, *Fable II* offers the player a whole other level of gameplay that, while it doesn't meaningfully contribute to the primary narrative, it has every possibility to meaningfully contribute to the player and their identity.

## 6.2 Player-Character-centric play

'Character-centric' (or avatar-centric) play encompasses elements within the game that focuses on, or privileges, the player-character as the focal point. This may include, but is not limited to, learning the game 'through' the player-character or gameplay that works to develop the player character directly. Although the player inherently controls the player-character, in single-player videogames the player-character often has their own, scripted identity separate from the player's actions or is often used as a vehicle to explore the gameworld (Carr, 2002; Newman, 2002; Martin, 2012). Various elements within the framework draw attention to the ways in which the game is experienced with and understood through the player-character. This type of gameplay facilitates the emergence of character-centric identities such as discovered identity and can encourage projective identity on behalf of the player. This section will focus on the aspects of gameplay that highlight the player-character and their potential identities.



### 6.2.1 Spatial Navigation

All three games necessarily deal with spatiality in terms of the player-character's body in some manner, yet each game has a distinctly different way of doing so resulting in different understandings of the gameworld and the player-character within it. In *Mirror's Edge* gameplay is focused on figuring out the path through the cityscape and buildings in order to make it to the next destination. The only vehicle the player has access to is Faith's body. While the expansive rooftops appear to be an open realm of navigational opportunity, there is actually only one path (rarely there is a second option). Jumps between buildings are determined by Faith's capabilities. As such, space becomes measure through Faith's physical abilities. Over time, a player can learn purely on visual perception a distance Faith may or may not be able to jump across.

This type of strictly controlled navigational spatiality is in complete contrast with both *Alone in the Dark* and *Fable II*, which both allow the player to roam relatively freely throughout almost all corners of the game-world. The word 'relative' is the operative word in this comparison, as *Fable II*, while boasting the vast open lands of Albion has a different set of mechanisms in place to define navigational boundaries; invisible walls. Like *Mirror's Edge*, the player must learn to understand the in-game physicality of Sparrow as it is determined by the affordances and limitations of the game design.

However, where *Mirror's Edge* establishes boundaries by spacing out the rooftops just enough or by making areas logistically inaccessible, *Fable II* simply blocks the player from advancing, even if visually, there should be no reason the player-character cannot advance. As described in chapter four, this occurs most often near 'dangerous' areas such

as cliffs and drop-offs into water. This invisible wall suddenly impedes the player from moving Sparrow any further ahead, regardless of the fact that there is no logical reason within the fiction of the gameworld.

As explained in Aarseth's article "Doors and Perception: Fiction vs Simulation in Games" (2007), there are spaces of fiction and of perception. Two things, such as the doors he uses as an examples, might look the same, but they do not act the same (p. 42-44). In Albion, there are areas that behave the same way. Even though there are places that the player can see on a perceptual level – they can see the edge of the cliff and the water below, if the game's fiction deems it necessary for the player-character to be able to access the water, while they are still blocked from simply running and jumping, the game will prompt the player to jump by flashing the "A" button on the screen. Otherwise, when an area is impassable, the player-character will simply keep running into the invisible wall. Over time, the player learns that, while the game-space visually extends outward, they cannot always access everything they see.

Interestingly, *Alone in the Dark* does not define the game-world through the player-character in the same way. While most missions in the game require the player to travel from point A to point B like *Mirror's Edge*, there is often more than one path to get there. Therefore, the game allows the player (and the player-character) to travel relatively freely through the streets of the city. Aided by a mini-map that acts like a global positioning system (gps) in the upper left hand corner, the player is not wholly dependent on learning the landscape through the physicality of Edward's body like in the two other games.

Instead, the player learns to understand spatiality through the perception the time it takes to travel from one destination to another (Ash, 2009). Unlike *Fable II*, where the player-character can ‘zone’ into another area in the matter of seconds, even though the fiction of the game informs the player that the ‘actual’ distance is 80 miles, or 13 hours on foot, travel in *Alone in the Dark* occurs in real time. As such, the player learns to understand the gameworld through the time it takes Edward to walk, run, or drive somewhere.

While spatial navigation is necessarily acted through the player-character, each game situates the player-character’s body differently. Whether it is using Faith’s body as a unit of measure, Sparrow’s body to delineate unperceived geographical boundaries, or Edward’s body as a measure of distance in relation to time, they all tie the player-character into the geography in a way that goes beyond the player’s interaction and control.

### **6.2.2 Non-playing Characters**

In many single-player videogames, the player-character pre-exists within a narrative structure, playing their own role within a bounded world. While the player facilitates the unfolding of the story through active gameplay, the player-character is more than a navigational tool for the player. Non-playing characters (NPC’s) play a large role in not only providing the player with additional narrative depth, they also work to support and develop the player-character. However, not all NPC’s play the same role in all videogames as will it will be seen in this section. This section will exclude discussions on player-character interactions with enemy NPC’s in combat situations.

Of the three game, *Mirror's Edge* has the lowest level of *player-character/non-player character* interactions. The most prominent in-game relationship that Faith has is with her dispatcher, Mercury, and communication is one-way. Mercury assigns Faith her missions, helps her with directions and notifies her when she is approaching danger. Through his language and tone, there is an inference that he cares for her at least on a professional of friend level. Faith never answers him back during gameplay. Otherwise, the only other times Faith is seen interacting with NPC's is during narrative cut-scenes, and even then, her participation is limited, if at all, beyond that of a spectator.

While Faith has a distinct identity within the narrative of the game, it is hardly supported or developed beyond a superficial level. The player never really learns why Faith was out of commission, or where she was before she came back to help find who framed her sister. The player is not given the opportunity to interact with the characters in the cut-scenes; they are not given any opportunity to dig into her past and find out these answers.

*Alone in the Dark* situates the player-character in the middle of a rich narrative that ultimately drives gameplay, and narrative is driven by NPC interactions throughout the game. There are no meaningless interactions or conversations within the game. They are all instrumental in advancing the narrative to some extent, and ultimately in uncovering Edward's identity for both the player, and for amnesiac Edward himself. In this manner, while the narrative gives purpose to the gameplay for the player, all NPC interactions focus explicitly on the player-character. There is no room for the player to impose their own version of Edward. There are no alternative storylines for the player to choose from. So

while the player is in control of navigating Edward through New York City, gameplay is ultimately focused on Edward.

Interestingly, *Fable II* offers a balance between the player-character as defined through the scripted narrative and the player-character as that which is developed through player choices. *Fable II* offers the widest range of NPC interactions and all NPC interactions contribute to Sparrow's identity in some capacity, but they are not all meaningful on the same level. Nor do they all focus on the player-character.

In regards to the primary level of narrative – the narrative that is predetermined by the game and that gives *Fable II* as a single-player videogame its general purpose – NPC interactions are strictly controlled by the game. Although the pacing is determined by the player, when the player-character is engaged in dialogue with a primary level NPC such as Theresa, the player has no control over the exchange. In this respect, primary level NPC interactions exist purely on the level of the player-character. Even though the information within the exchange informs the player of key narrative information, within the structure of the game, it is inherently player-character-centric.

Unlike *Mirror's Edge* and *Alone in the Dark*, *Fable II* offers a secondary level of narrative gameplay; one that is created and controlled by the player. The player has control over the extent to which they participate in this level of narrative interaction, all the NPC interactions include and affect the player-character.

### **6.2.3 Player/Player-character Interactions**

While gameplay necessarily includes player interactions, when within the context of 'player-character-centric' play, the focus is on the interactions that are dictated by, and

focus on the development of the player-character. As Rehak (2003) states, “the avatar is not simply a means of access to desired outcomes, but an end in itself...” (p. 107). However, not all games facilitate this level of ‘player-character-centric’ focus.

*Mirror’s Edge*, is one such example. Gameplay overall is relatively linear with very little interactions beyond those with the game’s environment described earlier. As the player navigates the player-character, there are no opportunities for the player to expand on or develop Faith Connors beyond what she was destined to be within the very first seconds of gameplay.

There are very few opportunities in *Alone in the Dark* for *player-character/player* interactions that focus on developing Edward as a player-character. There is no overt level of customisation in place, but Edward does have the possibility to carry an inventory. This may seem like a minute contribution, but Edward’s inventory is empty and it is up to the player to collect the items and determine which ones to keep since inventory space is limited. There is a range of items to be found throughout the game that can be used for a variety of reasons. Seeing that fire is required to win in combat, there are multiple choices of weapons within Edward’s possible arsenal. As such, different players may opt for different combinations. This type of choice could be conceived as player actions that contribute to Edward’s identity beyond the scripted narrative he assigned. One player may prefer to use Molotov cocktails every time possible, whereas another player may determine that Edward is more the type of guy who would use makeshift flamethrowers. Although both may get the job done, each one alters Edward’s identity, if only slightly.

Of the three games analysed, *Fable II* has the broadest range of opportunities for player affected player-character identity development. Although the choices are initiated by the player, they are facilitated by the game (game-centric) and are actualized through Sparrow (player-character-centric). There are two levels of player/player-character interactions that follow the primary and secondary narrative structure mentioned earlier in the section on player-character/NPC interactions. The choices that stem from the primary level affect Sparrow on a level that is meaningful to the main storyline. These choices are limited for the player and are often binary within the spectrum of morality that is built into the game. While the player is given the choice of which path to take, they are materialized into the player-character in a way that influences gameplay in turn. Choices stemming from the primary narrative are tied to the player-character on a more internal level in that the choices come from within the narrative and affect the player-character internally.

The secondary level of narrative offers the player more choices but have less influence on Sparrow in a way that can affect the primary level of narrative. In as much as these options deepen the player-character they do not emerge from within the player-character, ultimately shifting the focus of gameplay back to the player. It is the player's choices that are exerted on this level of interaction. Even though they are actualized within the player-character, they are not inherent to the scripted character that is Sparrow. As demonstrated, player-centric and player-character-centric play is inherently intertwined. As all actions with the game are initiated by the player through the gameplay process, the instigator of the interaction determines whether the gameplay focus privileges the player or the player-character.

### 6.3 Game-centric play

‘Game-centric’ play focuses on or derives from elements such as the game-environment, the use of audio and visual elements to enhance or alter gameplay, and the mediating technology that facilitates the interactions. As these aspects are inherently tied to the networked process of videogame play, the distinction in “game-centric’ play is defined by where the focus is during the gameplay. Whereas ‘player-centric’ play focused on gameplay that put the player as the central locus of action and ‘player-character-centric’ play posited the player-character in the leading role of gameplay, ‘game-centric’ play highlights the above-mentioned aspects of gameplay as being front and center.

There is an inherent overlap between many of the categories. For example, the section on spatiality, while focusing on the ways in which the player understood the gameworld through the player-character’s body, necessarily discusses the use of the game’s environment as a game mechanic in *Mirror’s Edge*. As such, this section will aim to disentangle the ‘game-centric’ aspects of play from other parts of the process that are tied to it by focusing on the core contributions of each element.

‘Game-centric’ play facilitates a different types of identities that are connected to the gameworld or that are affected by it. For example, in *Fable II*, there are player choices along moral alignments that visually affect the landscape. The choices do not derive from the game environment as per the context being discussed in this section, but their results influence the aesthetic of the gameworld, which in turn affects the experience the player has with it. Through the altered experience, different identities can be developed on a range



of levels that concern the player, the player-character, or even explicitly as just demonstrated, the identity of the game's environment.

### 6.3.1 Game Environment

One of the most expansive categories, the game environment, plays many roles in numerous capacities in every game, from using the landscape as the primary mechanic of gameplay to the way that the game's environment shapes the gameplay experience. All three games use their environments in a range of different ways. Beginning with the simplest of the three games, *Mirror's Edge* uses the landscape as the core gameplay mechanic. The goal of the game, besides figuring out who framed Faith's sister for murder, is to figure out the path to each destination. The landscape is a puzzle; a labyrinth disguised as a rooftops, hallways, and alleyways. The gameworld is not dynamic, and there is no other purpose to the game's environment than to navigate it.

*Alone in the Dark* offers a significantly broader game environment experience. Set in New York City, it boasts a fully dynamic environment where the player is not only able to interact with all objects in the game, interaction is necessary for combat, for navigation (lighting a chair on fire for a light source for example). Items found in the gameworld can be used to create weapons or to heal Edward's wounds. In this manner gameplay is not only facilitated by the game's environment, it dictates it. Without using the landscape, the player is not able to perform the necessary actions to successfully play the game as it was designed.

The gameworld also frames the atmosphere in *Alone in the Dark* in a way *Mirror's Edge* and *Fable II* do not. While atmosphere will be discussed further in the forthcoming

section on audio and visual elements, the landscape is designed to set a very specific tone. From the crumbling buildings and deserted city streets, without even interacting with the game's narrative, the player gets the sense that something bad has happened just by the game's environment. The use of indoor space is of no exception. Further establishing the feeling of desertion, many indoor areas are darkly lit, sparsely decorated and in various stages of disrepair, creating the sense of really being alone among the demons in the city. This is in stark contrast to the brightly lit corridors found in most (but not all) interior settings in *Mirror's Edge*. But while the indoor spaces in *Alone in the Dark* are dimly lit and often create a sense of confinement, the player is still free to explore every nook and cranny... if they are not too scared.

The most expansive game environment of the three games, *Fable II* offers an entire nation of vast countryside, towns, villages, and caves for the player to explore. While there are roads and paths etched across the landscape, the player is not obliged to follow them. However, even though the environment is made up of thousands of different things including wildlife, trees and flowers, wagons and treasure chests, not all objects are dynamic. The player can only interact with objects that are highlighted as such by the game. This is one of the ways that define 'game-centric' play. The player must engage in the game's environment beyond a navigational level to 'play' the game. But interaction with the game's environment is not unrestrained as it is in *Alone in the Dark*. Instead, the game shapes the player's experience by controlling which objects and artefacts the player can engage with and the ones they cannot. So while *Fable II*'s gameworld may be the most

expansive, even with more gameplay options, the play is still limited to the boundaries set by the game's design.

### 6.3.2 Audio/Visual

Audio/visual elements within videogames are complex, exist on both technical and perceptual levels, and serve a multitude of purposes that contribute to the overall gameplay experience. Dealing specifically on the in-game, perceptual treatment of audio/visual elements as opposed to their technical aspects, this section aims to compare the ways in the three games analysed in this dissertation utilize audio/visual elements to shape gameplay and create a specific experience. The reception of game-centric audio/visual elements is necessarily grounded in the player, however they are controlled by the game's environment.

Beginning with auditory elements, the three games offer an interesting comparison in that two of the three games use audio on a very basic level. *Mirror's Edge* employ audio on a predominantly extra-diegetic level with the use of ambient music in the case of which, while working to create atmosphere for the player and giving an auditory identity to the game, does not connect to the game world on any meaningful level. *Fable II* has long bouts of silence throughout the game as the player travels through the countryside, the only sounds the player can hear are the tweeting birds or the hoot of a night owl. Both *Mirror's Edge* and *Fable II* focus heavily on diegetic sounds such as the sound of Faith's laboured breathing as she runs across a rooftop, or combat sounds during battle in *Fable II*. While these audio components add depth to the overall gameplay experience, they do not communicate in-game information to the player that aids in gameplay directly. There are no sounds or music that warns the player that danger is lurking.

This, again, is in stark contrast to *Alone in the Dark*, which utilizes the audio to the fullest of its potential to not only represent the diegetic sounds found within the game such as Edward's footsteps as he walks on asphalt, but they also act as warning signs as was articulated in chapter four. The use of audio as warning signs communicates important information to the player that is directly relevant to gameplay. This pulls the player into the gameworld, connecting them to the fiction, and the fear, in an engaging manner (Perron, 2004). Sound also plays an important role in *Alone in the Dark* for creating atmosphere, even in its absence. Coupled with the dark and bleak cityscape, the absence of any other sound but Edward's footsteps informs the player that they are indeed, alone in the dark.

Visually speaking, *Mirror's Edge* and *Fable II* are again in the same category, one separate from *Alone in the Dark*, in that there is no explicit use of visual techniques to set a tone or enrich the environment. This is not to say that the use of sharp lines and bright whites and cold blues in *Mirror's Edge* does not frame a certain atmosphere, but the visual elements never change to reflect gameplay. *Fable II*, on the other hand, cycles through day and night, and so the visual elements reflect this passing of time.

Another common element among both games is the use of extra-diegetic visual cues to guide the player. *Mirror's Edge* utilizes Runner Vision. As described in chapter three, this when objects are highlighted in red which illuminate a directional path for Faith as she navigates her way through the city. *Fable II* employs the same type of indicator which is solely in place for the player. In the case of *Fable II*, as described in chapter five, the path illuminator is a golden path that stretched out before Sparrow when she is working on a

primary narrative quest. Of course, both player ‘hints’ can be turned off at the player’s discretion.

*Alone in the Dark* stands on its own in this respect as well. Already a visually rich environment, the game relies heavily on the use of lighting techniques to create the a horrific atmosphere and to instil a sense of fear and dread in the player. Using technical conventions adapted from horror films (Krzywinka, 2002), the use of shadows and harsh contrasts between dark and light (especially when using fire in dark corridors) creates tension in the game that affects the player often on a physiological level, influence the player’s ability to play the game. In this way, *Alone in the Dark* uses audio visual to instil fear in the player (game-centric element that influences player-centric play).

The ‘game-centric’ features of audio/visual in *Alone in the Dark* are features that are intrinsically linked to ‘player-centric’ play in that they exist expressly for the player. They exist to instil fear and anxiety within the player. Coupled with the use of audio as both a warning sign for player and to scare the player simultaneously, it is impossible to disentangle the perceptual aspects of audio/visual techniques from the player/game-environment interaction. It should be noted that the experience of fear is also wholly located in the player. So while the game is designed with the intent to elicit fear and anxiety, it cannot determined the player’s perception. Unlike a game such as *Mirror’s Edge*, where the game environment, it’s audio and visual techniques exist on a rudimentary level to the extent to which it is probable that most players have the same gameplay experience. As such, the analysis and assumptions made in regards to the use of auditory and visual elements to elicit fear in the player was drawn primarily from I, as analyst,

perceive to be the game's intended design. These primary assumptions were then coupled with my played experience, which, as noted, will surely be different than a more experienced survival horror videogame player.

### 6.3.3 Mediating Technology

The mediating technology plays an essential role in the networked process of videogame play, and more specifically in 'game-centric' play. The primary analyses focused on various aspects of the mediating technology, including screens and audio equipment. As such, this section will briefly address the ways in which the controller facilitates and defines 'game-centric' play.

From having to look at the buttons on the controller to figure out combinations during the early hours of gameplay in *Mirror's Edge* to gripping the controller in fear midway through playing *Alone in the dark*, the controller acts as a mediator, both physically and technically, between the player and the actions performed in the gameworld. While each game does so in a slightly different manner, the necessary commands derive from the game to inform the player what they have to with the controller. This is not to say that all players will respond appropriately (by pressing the correct buttons at the right times), but the use of the controller is in fact 'game-centric' if not game-specific.

Addressing the controller at the most basic level, button mapping defines the level of interaction and success within the game as well as the overall player experience. Interestingly, where *Mirror's Edge* has been the most one dimensional on gameplay and narrative levels, it has the most complex button mapping system of the three games. While the initial commands are relatively straight forward – only one button can handle one

command at a time – Faith has a repertoire of moves that require multiple buttons to be pressed or pushed at very specific moments of navigation. For example, to run along a wall, the player must simply run towards the wall at an angle (finding the specific angle takes a bit of time to figure out), and just as Faith nears the wall the player must press the ‘Upward Movement’ button. Although relatively simple in terms of button schemes, it can be a challenge to get the timing and the angle right. But there are four other moves that Faith can perform that build upon the basic ‘wall run’, each adding another button that needs to be pressed on top of the initial ‘wall run’ command to be pressed at particular moments. So while gameplay as ‘find your way through the city to get to your destination’ may be straightforward, the player is assigned a wide range of movements that are required in order to actually make it across the chasms between buildings and under the chain link fences. In order to know when to use what commands, the player has to rely on the game environment to tell them. Whether it’s through being at an impasse and having to try every command possible (while simultaneously running) to noting the rather infrequent instructional pop ups, the game dictates when the buttons need to be pressed.

In contrast to *Mirror’s Edge*’s button combinations,, *Alone in the Dark* has a relatively simple ‘combat’ system. However, the game has over sixty commands assigned to sixteen buttons. From navigational commands to inventory access and combining items to create weapons, the player must learn the gamut of commands to be able to play the game smoothly (without having to refer to the manual repeatedly). But not all of these commands are ‘game-centric’ in all the same manner. They are, of course, all ‘game-centric’ in that they derive from and affect action within the game, but the game does not

dictate their use in the same way that *Mirror's Edge* does. A lot of the buttons are can be accessed at the player's discretion in almost any situation. The game does not limit the ability to open Edward's inventory the same way that *Mirror's Edge* would deny the player access to a wall run without the proper timing and angle. Even in combat situations, the player has a range of weapons accessible to them. Even though the player learns from the situation within the game that they must use a weapon to combat an enemy, they has the option of at least a few buttons to perform a range of actions such as shooting a gun or throwing a Molotov cocktail.

Interestingly, *Fable II* has been repeatedly the game with the most options in terms of freedom of gameplay and movement, scope of control and interactions with the player-character. Yet in regards to the ways in which the controller facilitates gameplay is relatively facile. Movement uses only one button; the left joystick. Combat uses one button, even if it is a different button for different types of weapons, the player does not need to concentrate on learning the button mapping for too long.

*Fable II* is also the most explicit of the three games in overtly instructing the player when to push a button, specifically when engaging in conversations with NPC's or when approaching an object that can be interacted with. At its most extreme, when the player takes on a job to make money such as cutting wood or smiting, the player is instructed to hit the 'A' button at a very precise moment in order to successfully chop the wood or hit the metal (represented by a ball within an arc that moves from side to side). As the player's skill increases, arc shrinks, giving the ball less space to move, which translates to less time for the player to hit the button at the precise moment for success. In shrinking the arc, and



forcing the player to increase their reaction time, the game enforces its technical the player to adjust their reaction time, which becomes shorter and shorter. This essentially decreases the technical distance between the player and the gameworld.

Although the examples within this section focus on the mediating technology as a facilitating factor to the three different foci of gameplay detailed throughout this chapter, it is possible to have *mediating technology-centric* gameplay as well. While not seen specifically in the games selected for analysis, mediating technology-centric gameplay can be seen in motion control games on the Nintendo Wii and Xbox Kinect consoles, or games that use game-specific peripheral controllers such as *Rock Band* (Harmonix, 2007), and *Dance Dance Revolution* (Konami, 1998). Mediating technology-centric gameplay is concentrated on the mastering the technology (controller) itself rather than the gameplay proper. For example, in *Rock Band*, the player must learn to master the instrument they hold in their hands. While their actions are manifested within a gameworld, progression is strictly determined by the mastery of the mediating technology – in this case, a plastic guitar or drum kit.

## 6.4 Conclusions

It is understood that the first point of entry into most videogames is through the player-character. Each of the three gameplay chapters began by introducing the player-character and contextualizing their role within the game for the player. The introductions included descriptions of their visual representations and how I, as a player, identified with each of them. In the first few moments of gameplay, identification is tied to the player-

character and their visual representations. However, as gameplay progresses, the focus shifts from being centered on the player-character to the focus of gameplay.

All videogames embody player-centric, player-character-centric, and game-centric gameplay in varying degrees. They are not mutually exclusive categories. They often overlap or are intertwined depending on the title, genre, and play context. By concentrating on the locus of gameplay, it is possible to move beyond the idea that the player and the player-character are the nucleus of gameplay and identity development in videogame play. While some research focuses heavily on visual identification with avatars and player-characters, in doing so, it privileges certain types of analysis while omitting the importance of the entire networked process.

Through viewing videogame play as a networked process that includes a myriad of elements and interactions stemming from a range of sources, it becomes apparent that visual representation is only the first layer of meaning within the *player/player-character* relationship, and it is not a necessarily a generalizable variable across users. As gameplay is broken down into its networked components, visual representation often becomes a peripheral to gameplay. This can be illustrated in the various ways a game such as *Alone in the Dark* works to connect the player to the player-character despite a lack of visual similarities. By drawing the player in through its focus on gameplay elements such as interactions with the game environment through extensive navigation and meaningful exploration, the player has the potential to become connected with the actions and not necessarily with the player-character explicitly. Even though the game is played predominantly in the third-person perspective and Edward is constantly in the player's

visual scope, it is possible for player to move beyond merely visually identifying with the player-character by acknowledging the locus of gameplay in any given play context. Of course the actions in the game are Edward's but the locus of gameplay decentralizes the player-character as the central node of gameplay and re-contextualizes the player-character within the networked process of digitally mediated videogame play, refocusing the player's attention on the overall process of gameplay.

My assumption when beginning to play *Mirror's Edge* was that there would be a greater sense of identification, possibly translating to a deeper level of enjoyment, due to the visual similarities I shared with Faith. However, this was a personal sense of identification and one that was not an implicitly designed element. Not all players will identify (visually) with Faith the way that I did. As such, it is a level of identification that would not necessarily be experienced by other players, even if they were female. Coupled with the fact that the game is played in the first-person perspective, there were very few moments during gameplay where I was actually given the opportunity to identify with Faith on a visual level.

Through a systematic gameplay analysis, it became apparent that the locus of gameplay in *Mirror's Edge* was predominantly game-centric. With complex button/control schemas described in chapter three, the player-character fades away from the forefront of interaction as the player becomes focused on their hands and the controller in relation to movement within gameworld. Even though it is understood that the movement is Faith's, successful gameplay requires the player to master the extensive repertoire of controls in order to navigate swiftly across the gamescape. The more the player focuses on their hands,

the control schema, and the gameworld, the closer they are to the mechanics of the game. This could lead to a deeper sense of gamic identification – identifying with the gameplay instead of with any one component within the game – as it occurs on the level of (inter)action instead of a purely visual level between the player and the player-character. By stripping away the visual identification and centralizing gameplay on the play mechanics and the gameworld proper, it could be argued that the player is more connected to the gameworld through their hands instead of through the player-character.

Interestingly, of the three games played for this dissertation, *Fable II* focuses the most on visual representation as part of the gameplay. Yet this does not necessarily translate into a higher level of visual identification. Although the player is encouraged to make gameplay choices that visually alter the player-character, they are rarely in control of how those choices are physically manifested. This is exemplified in the blue scarring that results from player-character resurrections or through the transformation of bodily attributes such as skin complexion and eye color that change depending on moral alignment described in chapter four. On the surface, these actions appear to be player-centric, but they are actually player-character-centric in that they focus on the player-character and not on the player. This is not to say that there is no overlap between the two.

As it has been demonstrated, videogame play does not only occur between the player and the player-character. As such, it is pertinent to systematically examine the networked process of gameplay beyond this dyadic relationship. By focusing on the locus of gameplay while considering a broader range of gameplay interactions such as those found in the framework iterated throughout this dissertation, it is possible to conceive of different

forms of identity beyond those that are player- and player-character-centric when discussing identity and videogames.

## Chapter 7: (Re)Considering Hybrid-Identity

As defined in chapter two, in an MMOG context, hybrid-identity is an identity that is developed through the networked process of gameplay which is facilitated by the elements within the framework, including the mediating technology, and is external to both the player and the player-character. Coupled with the level of commitment and time played on behalf of the player, and influenced by the focus of gameplay designed into the game described in the previous section, the emergence of hybrid-identity is dependent on a wide range of contributing factors. Although it is possible to locate hybrid-identity and follow the process of its development in MMOG play over time (Boudreau, 2007), not all genres and play-contexts contain the necessary conditions for this hybrid-identity to this extent to emerge. Single-player videogames inherently limit the possibility due to the structured nature of many games which often leads to more fleeting instances of hybrid-identity.

The goal of this dissertation has been to develop and test a set of tools that facilitate gameplay analysis in determining the extent to which, if at all, hybrid-identity has the necessary conditions to emerge during the gameplay process. By analysing the gameplay of three distinctly different games through the lens of the framework described in chapter two, it has been established that hybrid-identity is not dependent on any one particular aspect of the framework. It is developed through the cumulative play process that extends well beyond any one type of interaction. Although there is no ‘ideal’ combination of elements that necessarily lead to the emergence of hybrid-identity, and the elements themselves can change depending on different play conditions, genres and game titles, the preceding

chapters demonstrated that the more prominent and evenly distributed the framework elements were during gameplay, the more potential there was for hybrid-identity to occur.

## 6.1 Comparing Framework Prominence

Contextualized more extensively within their individual chapters, the results from each chart which are combined in figure 36 represent the played experience of one player; myself. The charts are meant to represent only one played example and serve as a visual aid to illustrate how the framework can be utilized to compare multiple games. While the distribution of framework elements in highly structured games such as *Mirror's Edge* will be relatively homogenous across individual gameplay experiences, games that offer the player a broader range of choices, such as *Fable II*, will vary more widely. Therefore, it should be noted that the distribution levels may vary for the same game depending on different player experiences.

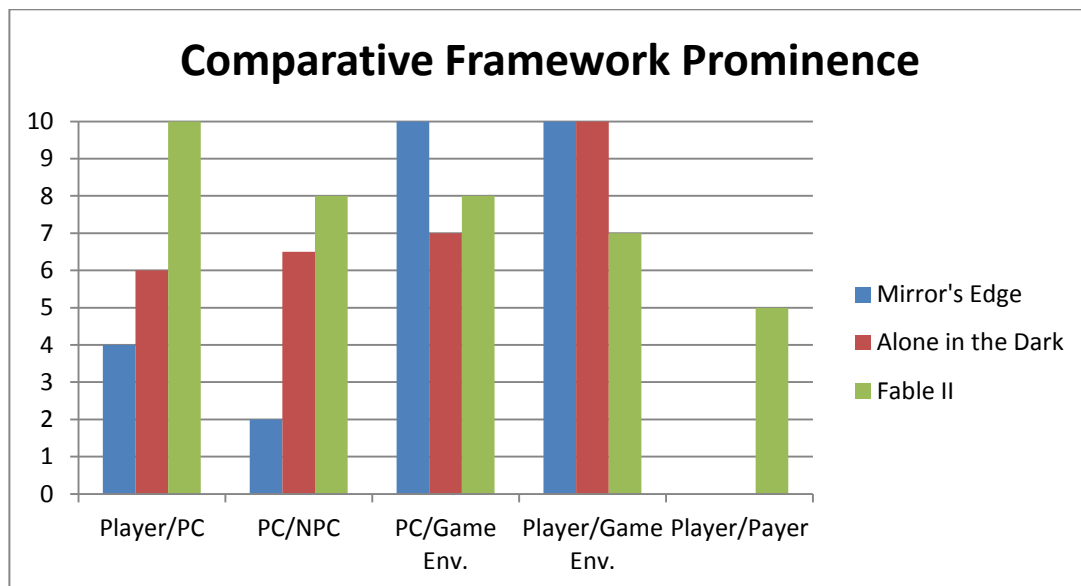


Figure 36: Comparative Framework Prominence

Comparing the prominence levels across the three games as seen in the chart in figure 36, we can see that *Fable II* has the most even distribution of all five elements of the three games analysed. It is also the only game with a co-op component. Based on these conditions, coupled with the fact that it was the game with the most balanced gameplay focus, which will be illustrated later in this chapter, it was determined to have the highest potential for the emergence of hybrid-identity out of the three games. This was to be expected to some extent, as conventions of the RPG genre facilitates gameplay that enables some degree of freedom of control, a necessary focus on player-character development, and utilizes the gameworld in often meaningful ways. As the framework was initially developed through MMOG play, they inherently share these qualities. During *Fable II*, hybrid-identity emerged during the moments of gameplay that could, at times, be distinguished as ‘not quite me’ (the player) and not the scripted player-character. However, there was no external entity that could be distinctively pointed to as hybrid-identity (excluding co-op gameplay) in the same way as is possible in long-term MMOG play. As such, players may be unaware of this phenomena during active gameplay.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, *Mirror's Edge* had the least diverse distribution of the three games. The dominant focus of gameplay was on the player and player-character's interactions with the game environment. This is characteristic of adventure games where the focus of gameplay is centered on the *player/game-environment* and the *player-character/game-environment* relationships. The goal of the game, narratively speaking, is to find out who framed Faith's sister for murder, the mechanics of gameplay focuses on figuring out how to get from point A to point B. Even though the



game is visually expansive, there is usually only one (and a maximum of two) ways to get to your destination. The core of the gameplay in *Mirror's Edge* is figuring out what the path is.

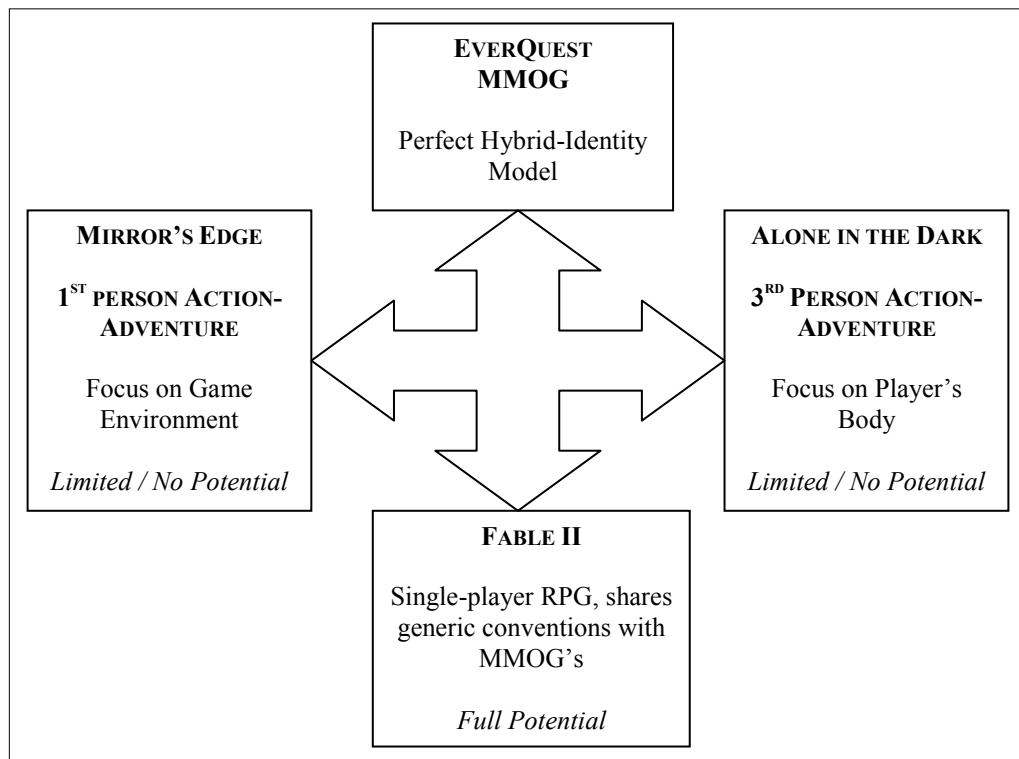
It could be argued that since the player is in control of the player-character, the potential for hybrid-identity may be higher. However, the player cannot affect the player-character in any way. Faith is a wholly pre-determined character within a very linear narrative. There isn't even an inventory system for the player to add to like we see in *Alone in the Dark*. The limited prominence of other aspects of the framework coupled with the fact that the gameplay is inherently 'game-centric', there is relatively no chance for hybrid-identity to occur, even fleetingly. With the exception of player skill, all players have relatively the same gameplay experience.

On the one hand, similar to *Fable II*, the distribution of the framework elements in *Alone in the Dark* are relatively even. Based on this criterion alone, it could be assumed that there would be a higher potential for hybrid-identity to occur, although the actual distribution levels are relatively low, leading to a decreased potential for hybrid-identity to emerge. Even though the narrative is richer, and there are often more than one way to complete a task, the narrative and gameplay remain significantly linear.

On the other hand, in contrast to *Fable II*, where the dominant focus of gameplay is between the player and the player-character, *Alone in the Dark* is focused on the player and the game-environment. However, not in the same manner that we see in *Mirror's Edge* which shares an equal rating. Although they are both categorized as action-adventure games, player perspective and the locus of gameplay differ. Where the player must figure

out the gameworld in *Mirror's Edge*, accounting for the high level of prominence of the *player/game environment* element, *Alone in the Dark* wholly acts on the player by eliciting fear and anxiety through gameplay and design elements. This hyper-focus on the player's body in this context inhibits the possibility for hybrid-identity to emerge since the player is in a state of constant awareness of their body external to the game. Though the framework element prominence chart may help to draw generalized conclusions across different games and genres, when considering whether or not a game has a higher or lower potential for hybrid-identity to emerge based on designed elements found within the game, there are both genre specific and played specificities that cannot always be expressed generally.

To summarize, the following diagram (figure 37) shows the contrasting poles of the potential for hybrid-identity.



**Figure 37: Comparative Potential Diagram**

As we can see, with *EverQuest* on top as the foundational model upon which the concept of hybrid-identity was initially established, its polar opposite in the realm of single-player videogames from within the three games analysed is *Fable II*. As a single-player role-playing game, as mentioned above, it shares generic commonalities story-driven gameplay, a concentrated focus on player-character development, and an open-ended gameworld for the player/character to explore.

The potential for deeper levels of engagement in RPG's is connected to the less structured style of gameplay, wide range of player freedom, and broader scope of gameplay choices for the player. Gameplay in *Fable II* is spread across the *player/player-character*, the *player/game-environment*, and *player-character/game-environment* relationships. While *Fable II* remains a scripted, single-player game, the player is able to create ties with, and through the player-character that actively contributes to the possible emergence of hybrid-identity.

Situated to the left of *EverQuest* is *Mirror's Edge*. The only obvious connection between the two is the use of the landscape as a gameplay mechanic, albeit in different ways. In *EverQuest*, and MMOG's more generally, the player uses the gameworld for resources, for navigation, and for combat. Whereas in *Mirror's Edge*, the player seeks to find the intricate pathway through to their next destination, this one-dimensional, if complex, use of the game environment limits the player's potential to engage in any other aspect of the game. Therefore in this manner, *Mirror's Edge* has very little potential for hybrid-identity to emerge.

Finally, to the left of *EverQuest* and completely opposite *Mirror's Edge* is *Alone in the Dark*. Contrary to *Mirror's Edge*, where gameplay occurs in the first-person perspective removing Faith's body from the player's visual scope and, one could argue, from the played narrative, *Alone in the Dark* is centered around the tormented pursuit of the game's antagonist through a predominantly third-person perspective. However, while the player-character's body is front and center to gameplay, the primary focus of the game is on the player and their bodily reception of the fear exuded by the game's design.

In this context, the *player/player-character* relationship is at the forefront of gameplay. However, it is not focused on player-character advancement as seen in *Fable II* where the player actively works to develop the player-character. Rather, the relationship is grounded in the distinct 'otherness' of the player-character in order for the narrative conventions of survival horror to have a full effect. This concentration on the player's body negates the potential for hybrid-identity to occur. Even though the player is actively engaged in the gameplay in a meaningful context, the manifestation of fear in the player's body keeps the emergence of any type of identity firmly planted in the player. Even though the game may pull the player in, it is a constant tug-of-war of in-game actions and corporeal emotion.

Through the in-depth analyses of *Mirror's Edge*, *Alone in the Dark*, and *Fable II*, it has been illustrated that hybrid-identity, as it was defined through socially driven MMOG gameplay, is fleeting if not elusive in single-player videogames for a range of reasons outlined throughout this chapter. With heavily scripted narratives, predetermined player-characters with ready-made identities, and predominantly guided gameplay, it may be

necessary to redefine hybrid-identity to reflect the single-player experience or reconsider what types of identity single-player videogames facilitate within the process of gameplay to better reflect the non-social, single-player experience.

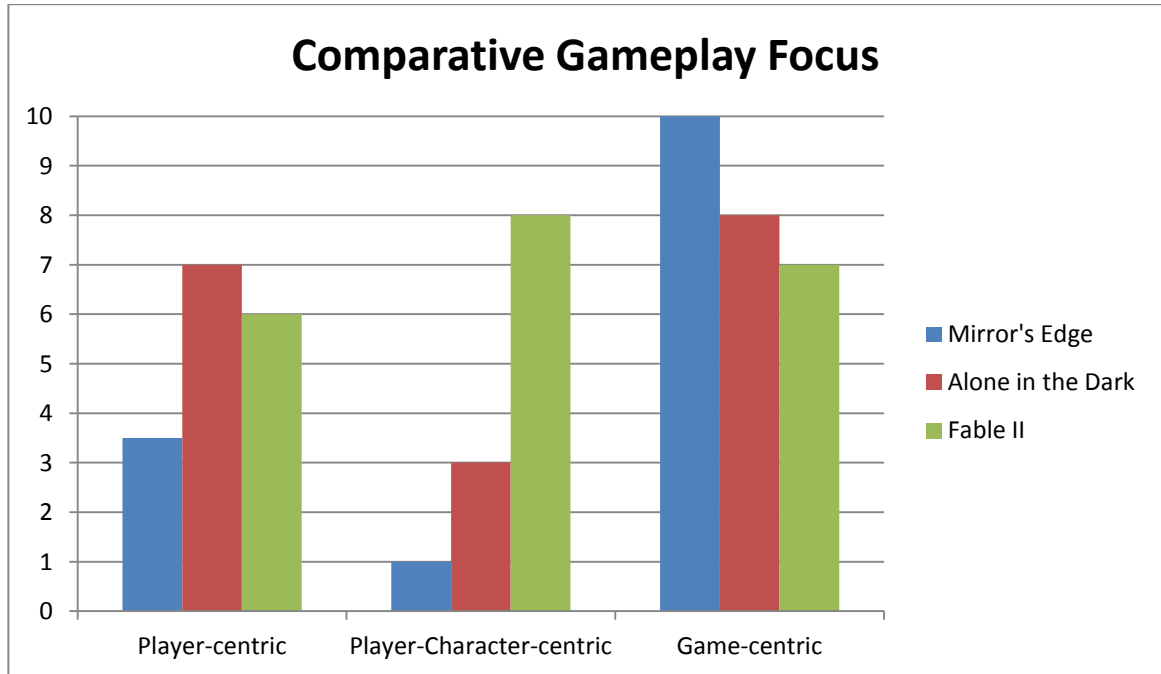
## 6.2 Comparing Gameplay Focus

It has been elucidated that in order to fully understand the unique complexity of the emergence of different types of identity in single-player videogames, it is necessary to consider each element within the framework equally even if they play different roles within the gameplay process. Even though the player is the locus of action in that they must load the game and push the buttons, to further comprehend the process through which different identities may emerge – whether projective, discovered or hybrid-identity –, it is imperative to look at where the core of the gameplay action occurs as well.

Applied in conjunction with the analytical framework, acknowledging the ‘focus of gameplay’ creates a broader understanding of the contributing factors in the emergence of different types of identity<sup>25</sup> in the gameplay process. As illustrated below in figure 38, the ‘focus of gameplay’ as described in chapter 6 for each of the three games analysed was clustered around the ‘game-centric’ category. In *Mirror’s Edge*, the primary interactions transpired between the *player/game environment* and the *player-character/game environment*. In the case of *Alone in the Dark*, gameplay was predominantly based on *player/game environment* interactions which worked to instil fear within the player.

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<sup>25</sup> Although this dissertation focuses on projective, discovered, and hybrid-identity, it is possible that through deeper analysis, other forms of identity may arise.



*Figure 38: Comparative Gameplay Focus*

Other contributing aspects to ‘game-centric’ gameplay include the audio and visual aspects that enhance or alter gameplay and the game’s geography on both a visual and navigational level. These aspects, among others, have the potential to contribute to the emergence of different types of identity during the networked process of gameplay. More importantly, it highlights the fact that identity is created and shaped by gameplay that occurs beyond the *player/player-character* relationship.

Deceptively, judging solely on the gameplay focus, *Alone in the Dark* appears to fare relatively well across each category as it has a high level of player- and game-centric gameplay. This would infer that *Alone in the Dark* has a multitude of gameplay elements that contribute to or facilitated the emergence of identities. Yet, when the ‘focus of gameplay’ is contextualized within the deeper framework analysis, it becomes evident that the possible emergence of different types of identity related to any of the three foci is

limited due to the conventions of the single-player survival horror game as outlined briefly in chapter two, and from the game-specific play descriptions found in chapter four. In this case, concentrating on the ‘focus of gameplay’ alone only illustrates a portion of the gameplay process leading to a false conclusion.

Although *Fable II* had a relatively high level of game-centric gameplay, compared to the other two games, it was considerably lower. It did, however, have the most even distribution across the three ‘foci of gameplay’. As such, it could be concluded that there were more opportunities within the networked process of gameplay that could potentially lead to the development of different identities, including hybrid-identity since gameplay was not limited to only one aspect.

Following the distribution of gameplay focus, it could be hypothesized that games with a higher ‘game-centric’ or ‘player-character-centric’ play would result in a greater potential for identities that derive from the game itself such as discovered identity. Games with a higher concentration on ‘player-centric’ gameplay would result in more opportunities for player based identities to develop such as projective identity. Finally, games where the distribution is relatively equal across the three foci of gameplay could be said to offer the most opportunity for hybrid-identity to emerge in conjunction with other foci-specific identities.

Nonetheless, it is important to note that the case of *Alone in the Dark* illustrates that the emergence of different forms of identity lies not entirely in the ‘focus of gameplay’ alone, but in the entire networked process of play itself within each play context. Different games communicate game-specific information requiring the player to make a range of

prescribed play decisions. These decisions are influenced by both game design and the unique condition of each player as well as the mediating technology used in any given gameplay session. As such, discussions surrounding videogames and identity must take the entire networked process of play into consideration.

### **6.3 Hybrid-Identity, Conditions & Contexts**

The details of each specific game is paramount in understanding the position of played experiences within the context of the networked process of play and its role in the potential emergence of hybrid identity. Considered as a cumulative whole, the systematic analyses make it possible to distinguish common aspects of gameplay across titles and genres that facilitate, or inhibit, the potential emergence of hybrid-identity in videogame play in general. Drawing on the three games discussed throughout this dissertation, it is possible to begin a broader discussion on what these three games as a whole say about the hybrid-identity and its potential to emerge in single-player videogames. It should be noted that while it is possible to begin to make broader claims regarding hybrid-identity from the three gameplay analyses, the conclusions drawn are preliminary and further research on a larger range of games is necessary.

Unlike socially motivated games such as MMOG's, single-player videogames are often heavily driven by their narrative. By looking at the three games as a whole, it is evident that the more narratively structured the game, the less opportunities there appear to be for hybrid-identity to emerge. This is clearly visible when comparing a linear storyline such as the one found in *Mirror's Edge* where there is only one path to one ending with a more complex narrative as the one found in *Fable II* where the player has a broader range



of narrative arcs which lead to more player choices which may result in different endings (only two in this case). This could be tied to player agency in that the more opportunities the player has to make meaningful decisions beyond learning and playing out a predetermined set of scripted actions, the more they inject aspects of themselves into the gameplay.

Looking at *Mirror's Edge* as a relatively closed system where the player's role is predominantly to move the narrative forward through a very narrow set of available actions, there is little choice for the player to go outside of what the game wants them to do. Gameplay in *Mirror's Edge* is fundamentally tied to the *player/game environment* relationship as it is tightly intertwined with the *player-character/game environment*. There are very few, if any, opportunities for the player to make gameplay choices that stem from within themselves or that influence the *player/player-character* relationship. Although the process of gameplay is a cyclical networked process that requires the player's input, the recursive loop is fairly tight, forcing the player to follow the rules of the game rather strictly. In this type of highly structured game, the gameplay experience is uniform no matter how many times a player replays the game.

However, more player choice does not necessarily always translate to more opportunities for player expression and hybrid-identity. The types and consequences of the choices matter as well. This is exemplified in *Alone in the Dark*, where the player has more options in the game in terms the gameplay (such as inventory and navigation among other aspects), but these choices are purely instrumental within the game. The *player/game environment* interactions exist solely for the advancement of the narrative. The repertoire of

actions available to the player are determined by the design of the game in light of the player-character. It is the player-character's identity that the player discovers through gameplay. There is little room for the player to engage with the player-character in a way that would alter the player-character's identity; at least not on any noticeable or meaningful manner. As such, the *player/player-character* relationship remains primarily a functional one. So while there are more gameplay options, opportunities for the player to assert aspects of their own identity into the game are almost non-existent. As there is no exchange between player and player-character, discovered identity derives predominantly from the scripted characteristics of the player-character.

This is not to say that hybrid-identity is solely reliant on projective identity of the player, but for hybrid-identity to emerge, there has to be some level of player input into the gameplay beyond the mere facilitation of prescribed actions. There needs to be a balance among the elements of the framework which includes both the player and the player-character. Role-playing games often offer a more balanced form of gameplay in this manner.

A game such as *Fable II* offers the player a larger set of opportunities to play both with the game's structure and the player-character while infusing their own identity into the gameplay which is demonstrated through the *player/game environment* interactions, and the ways in which the player chooses to develop the player-character through the *player/player-character* interactions. The game can be replayed in many ways based on different decisions which can lead to a new experience each time. While there are only two possible narrative endings in *Fable II*, for a single-player game in general, the choices that

are available to the player throughout the process of gameplay are more balanced between actions that are instrumental and expressional<sup>26</sup> than the other two games in this dissertation.

Viewed together, these three games begin to illuminate the necessity for player agency in gameplay in order for hybrid-identity to have the potential to emerge. With meaningful choices, the player is able to be part of the game beyond an instrumental level. Ultimately, it is possible for hybrid-identity to emerge from a balanced level of projective and discovered identity (as well as other types of identity that may emerge during gameplay) within the larger networked process of play.

Although it was not an overt decision to analyse two games that fall within the same general genre, it has been possible to make a set of observations that help to begin to delineate the potential conditions for hybrid-identity for future analysis. Both *Mirror's Edge* and *Alone in the Dark* are generally classified as 'action-adventure' games<sup>27</sup> in terms of their gameplay mechanics. Yet both are very different games with a diverse set of

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<sup>26</sup> Expressional aspects of the game are those that enable the player to perform non-instrumental actions within the game such as marriage and aesthetic choices that affect the player-character or game environment but that do not have any influence on the narrative or the functional gameplay.

<sup>27</sup> Despite the fact that both games are categorized as 'action-adventure' at the gameplay mechanics level, they are distinctively different in terms of their narrative genres and on other levels of gameplay. For a deeper reading on the complexity and hybrid nature of genres in videogames see Dominic Arsenault's 2011 doctoral dissertation "Des typologies mécaniques à l'expérience esthétique : fonctions et mutations du genre dans le jeu vidéo".

narrative characteristics and gameplay elements and focus that inherently alters the balance of the networked process of play leading to the potential (or hindrance) of hybrid-identity.

Looking at the basic components of action-adventure gameplay, primarily the focus on solving puzzles – whether in the navigational sense seen in *Mirror's Edge*, or in the narrative sense dominant in *Alone in the Dark* – the extent to which the player is involved differs greatly and in turn, has a different impact on the potential for hybrid-identity to develop. In *Mirror's Edge*, the gameplay is heavily game-centric, focusing on the *player/game environment* relationship as seen in chapter three and chapter six. Even though the player is in control of the player-character's movement, the level of player involvement occurs largely on a visual level, largely negating the *player/player-character* relationship. The player is not required to think deeply on how to solve a challenge more than they have to visually scope out the landscape, whether rooftops or corridors, and navigate forward through trial and error until they find the prescribed path to the next destination.

Gameplay in *Alone in the Dark* is heavily game-centric, but with a broader range of *player/game environment* interactions than *Mirror's Edge*. Over the course of the game, *Alone in the Dark* presents the player with bits and pieces of information that the player must figure out their function within the designed gameplay goals. The player must figure out how to navigate across the open gameworld, as well as collect artefacts to create weapons in order to defeat an array of enemies. The assumption would be that with higher levels of player involvement, there would be a higher chance for hybrid-identity to emerge. But it is important to consider the what actions are available to the player. Although the level of player involvement differs between them, the primary focus of the involvement is

explicitly on instrumental in both games. As such, the player is participating in the gameplay process on a mechanical level and not necessarily on a personal, or creative level. Although the player contributes to the development of the game, the paths and outcomes in both games are already closely scripted with little room for hybrid-identity to emerge in this specific, isolated, aspect of the action-adventure game.

Even though not classified as an action-adventure game, the role-playing game *Fable II*, has adventuring as a core element of gameplay. However, within the RPG context, adventuring implies more than just puzzle solving; it implies exploring as well. In the act of exploration, there is often more room for the player to make navigational choices based not only on gameplay mechanics but on personal preference as well. Whether it is following the marked paths or wandering through the gameworld, different choices result in different gameplay experiences which further influence the extent to which different identities have the potential to emerge. The broader the range of choices offered to the player, the more potential there is for hybrid-identity to emerge as there are more elements interacting within the networked process of gameplay.

Another aspect that has surfaced in considering two games from the same general genre is the role of point-of-view in the possible emergence of hybrid-identity. *Mirror's Edge* is played in a first-person point-of-view, whereas *Alone in the Dark* is played in a predominantly third-person point-of-view. The logical theory in the analyses chapters and supporting literature was that a first-person perspective draws the player into the game more so than a third-person point-of-view. Following this notion, it could be assumed that first-person point-of-view would be a contributing condition for hybrid-identity, as it

situates the player visually directly into the gameworld. In this sense, it arguably strengthens the *player/player-character* relationship by uniting their visual focal point. In the context of an action-adventure game, it could be conceived that it is the player, and not the player-character that is solving the puzzle. This is in contrast to a third-person point-of-view, where the player is visually aware of being external to the player-character, and as such, is forced to be outside of the action to some extent, arguably weakening the *player/player-character* relationship. In this perspective, while the player is actively solving the puzzle, the actions are performed (visually) through the player-character's body. However, after an extensive break down of the gameplay of both games in chapters three and four, this was not necessarily the case.

Within the context of action-adventure games (and specifically the two analysed for this dissertation), it was concluded that regardless whether the player is in first- or third-person point-of-view, point-of-view is not innately tied to hybrid-identity. This is because gameplay is dependent on the player's interaction with the gameworld on an instrumental level as well as with (or through) the player-character. The level of immersion (or sense of connection) the player has with the player-character is secondary to the functional level of gameplay. Since hybrid-identity emerges through the networked process of play and exists between the player and the player-character, the role of point-of-view in the context of the action-adventure game, where gameplay is focused heavily on the *player/game environment* relationship, is less prominent than may be the case in other genres where gameplay is distributed more evenly across the elements within the network.

In considering these two gameplay analyses together, they clearly illustrate that while generic conventions are important for gameplay and player expectations to some extent, they do not necessarily determine the conditions necessary for hybrid-identity to occur. There is not one set of conditions universal to a particular genre for hybrid-identity to emerge as not all generic conventions are systematically applied to all games within a generic category, nor are the shared conventions distributed to the same extent in every game. This is exemplified by acknowledging the generic cross-over seen in the adventuring aspect of the RPG *Fable II*. Essentially, different generic conventions alter the role of gameplay elements such as point-of-view. Therefore, while the genre is important for framing the context of gameplay, it cannot be the only lens used when considering the emergence of hybrid-identity.

Beyond generic boundaries, through looking at all three games as a group, the necessity to consider the networked process of play as a whole when trying to determine the conditions necessary for the potential emergence of hybrid-identity has been demonstrated. The analyses of the three games revealed that hybrid-identity is possible in single-player videogames, but not necessarily to the same extent or in the same form as seen in MMOG's. Instead of being an identity that exists between the player and the player-character that develops through the networked process of play and has the potential to materialize over time through the shared imagination of a community, hybrid-identity may occur in single-player games but it is more fleeting and often remains intangible. In effect, depending on the genre and title of the game, it is often a sense that there is *something* more than the two distinctly separate identities of the player and the player-character at play. Due

to the different conventions of single-player games such as the pacing of the gameplay, the structure of the narrative, and the lack of a social component which helps stabilize identity, the potential emergence of hybrid-identity is heavily dependent on the played experience of any given game.

The analyses also showed that hybrid-identity is not a separate identity that stands completely separate from other forms of identity such as projective and discovered identity. Rather, it encompasses these identities as it requires the player's identity (which includes, but is not limited to, projective identity) as well as the identity of the player-character (which includes discovered identity) to be able to emerge. However, it is not a simple amalgamation of projective (player) identity plus discovered (player-character) identity equaling hybrid-identity. There is much more to hybrid-identity than just the relationship (and interactions) between the player and the player-character. Coupled with the foci of gameplay and the influence of all the elements within the networked process of play, hybrid-identity emerges from within the *entire* networked process of play and as such, includes all forms of identity present within the process.

Finally, the analyses illuminated the fact that by looking at individual gameplay aspects out of their played contexts and outside of the intertwined network, the analytical results can be deceiving, or downright erroneous. When gameplay elements are analysed out of their played context, it has been demonstrated that they lose their networked meaning. Ultimately, gameplay is an intricate networked process that envelops a wide range of elements and contexts which are interdependent on each other for their meaning. As an



identity that is born through the process of play, hybrid-identity can only be established by addressing the whole network within the played experience.

## 6.4 Methods, Networks & Hybrid-Identity

There are a wide range of research methods that have been appropriated from many other disciplines to deconstruct videogame play depending on the specific research goals. As a developing field, it is possible that the methods available to the researcher may not be suitable to get to the heart of a particular research question. Although this dissertation utilizes different methods from the social sciences, there still needed a method that would work towards deconstructing the networked process of gameplay in order to gain knowledge of the process and potential emergence of hybrid-identity in videogame play. The method had to take into consideration not only the player and their experience, but also all the elements that make up the entire networked process of play in a way that did not necessarily privilege the *player/player-character* relationship and that gave equal weight to each element. It is for this reason that the framework described in chapter two and developed throughout this dissertation was devised.

Specifically, the framework works to disentangle and highlight different gameplay elements across all aspects of the network while actively acknowledging their inherent role in the overall process without privileging one element over another. Furthermore, the framework functions to contextualize the elements within the specificities of the particular game being analysed. Finally, employing the framework makes it possible to analyse different games across genres by focusing on the elements within the network instead of focusing solely on the narrative or generic characteristics of a particular title. These are also

an important elements that influences gameplay and should be considered within the context of analysis. However, when looking for the conditions necessary for hybrid-identity to emerge, they are not the only factors to consider.

Viewing gameplay initially through the lens of the framework made it possible to conceptualize another layer of analysis, the ‘focus of gameplay’ as described in chapter six, which encompasses the elements of the framework. In doing so, it became possible to categorize the different played elements of the framework in relation to the focus of gameplay to distinguish the nuances within each element. This adds another level to the understanding of the process of gameplay which can help clarify the different types of identity that have the potential to emerge depending on the focus of the gameplay and the defining characteristics and concentration of framework elements within each played context.

Essentially, using the framework as a procedural tool works to draw out the elements within the networked process of play across genres which acts to elucidate the aspects of gameplay that contribute to the emergence of hybrid-identity. Different games will inevitably have different emphasis on different aspects and elements of gameplay, but if all elements are drawn out equally, it is possible to determine the different levels of contribution each element has in different contexts. In this respect, the framework helps to standardize the elements on a more general scale for a broader understanding what elements contribute to hybrid-identity in which contexts (and which don’t).

By being able to systematically break down the wide range of elements within the networked process of play in a particular played experience across different games, it is

possible to shift the discussion from the specificities of each game to a broader exchange on the overall contribution of specific elements on the potential for hybrid-identity to surface. On a more practical level, through the analysis of multiple games, noting whether or not the player experienced hybrid-identity during gameplay or could identify moments where they may have felt it emerge in reflection through employing ethnographic methods such as observation and interviews, it is possible to map out the prominence of framework elements in each played experience as they contributed to each noted instance.

It would then possible to compare the played mappings of individual experiences to static mappings of prescribed, in-game elements that make-up the designed (or predetermined) aspects of gameplay such as point-of-view and audio-visual elements of the same title. Ideally, over time through more extensive research with more players and wider range of game titles, it could be possible to determine the designed aspects of single-player videogame play that potentially contribute to the possible emergence of hybrid-identity during gameplay.

Finally, using the framework as a research method also worked to disentangle the concepts of process, loops, and networks within a videogame play context in order to situate the space in which hybrid-identity can emerge. Videogame play is often referred to as a cybernetic feedback loop between the player, the technology that mediates the gameplay, and the game itself. Within this loop, there is a broader network of elements that are contained within each of the three aspects of the loop. When discussing the process of gameplay, it infers an instructional set of actions.

On an overarching level, through the applied use of the framework, this dissertation has demonstrated that feedback loops occur on multiple levels within a larger network of gameplay. No one element or exchange is privileged within the network. Some may be more dominant or occur more often than others in different contexts resulting in different forms of identity, but all of the elements are equally important to the networked process of gameplay which occurs within a broader cybernetic loop between player, mediating technology and game system (gameworld and mechanics).

It is important to differentiate between process, loop, and network when discussing hybrid-identity because in using the framework as an analytical lens to systematically delineate and describe each element within the played context, it has come to light that hybrid-identity exists throughout the entire network. The interactions between elements are not always clearly delineated or easily traceable, nor are they always directly linked between two elements. Multiple elements can interact with numerous other elements at the same time. This is exemplified in *player/game environment* which are intrinsically connected to *player-character/game environment* interactions. In order for this loop between the three framework elements to occur, many other actions exist. While on the surface, it is essentially a loop between the player, the player-character, and the game environment, there are many other interactions that occur within each of these relationships such as audio/visual elements found in the game and the reception of these audio/visual elements on behalf of the player. It is in networked gameplay moments such as this that hybrid-identity can occur; the more complex the network, the more opportunities there are for hybrid-identity to emerge.

## 6.5 Conclusions

The three gameplay analysis chapters have illustrated that hybrid-identity in single-player videogames is generally fleeting and a lot more difficult to identify exact moments of its occurrence during the gameplay process. There are a wide range of reasons for this, including the scripted nature of single-player videogames. The player's focus is concentrated and is controlled by the game's structure, often funneled through the gameplay experience by the game's design. Although different genres offer varying levels of player freedom, actions are nonetheless prescribed to work towards the unfolding of a predetermined narrative (and character) path.

As many single-player videogames are based on playing out a particular story through a set of prescribed actions. The player does not usually have the opportunity (and time) to reflect on their relationship with the player-character during gameplay, let alone with the broader network of elements. Pacing is often an important design tool to create a particular experience for the player, normally giving the player time only to consider their next move within the structured gameworld. This, of course, differs across genres, as some games<sup>28</sup> do allow the player ample, if not unlimited opportunity to think about their actions.

In this manner, many single-player videogames often (or attempt to) offer a homogeneous gameplay experience for all players. While there are exceptions to this and

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<sup>28</sup> This can be most commonly seen in what is called 'sandbox' games, where there is a set narrative and goals designed into the game, but the player is able to accomplish them at their own pace, and are free to explore the gameworld at their leisure. Rock Star's *Grand Theft Auto* series (1997-2011) is an example of this type of open-ended gameplay.

the extent to which homogeneity occurs varies across genres, the overall experience in single-player games are not typically designed to be entirely limitless and wholly controlled by the player. In the very least, many single-player games do not allow the player to fully control the creation and development of the player-character, the direction of the narrative, or the flow and pacing of gameplay. This is not to say that all games keep the player under tight control, but rather, that in order for a single-player game to be successful, it often needs to develop at a particular pace with a distinct beginning, middle, and end no matter how intricate the ending may appear. Yet throughout this dissertation, it has become evident that each of these elements in varying degrees, play an important role in the potential emergence of hybrid-identity in the networked process of videogame play.

Although RPG's offer a broader range of almost all of the elements within the framework, and there is often more player involvement *in* the game as well as *with* it, single-player games are still structured around a particular narrative with a specific set end goal and a scripted character – no matter how loosely scripted, the player-character is not wholly the player's creation in a single-player RPG – their choices will always be limited to fit within the story and goals of the game. Within single-player videogames, RPG's are the genre with the highest level of potential for hybrid-identity to develop because they offer the broadest range of opportunities for the player to bring in elements of themselves (whether these aspects are true to their 'real' identity or not is not the issue at hand, but that they must invest more of themselves into the gameplay than other genres). In single-player RPG's, there is more room for the player to interact with the player-character – even if it is

a scripted character as we saw in *Fable II* and Sparrow, and the gameworld. With more space for open gameplay, there are more opportunities for hybrid-identity to occur.

No matter how tightly structured a game is, each played experience of any game will always be different for every player. As the player is an integral part of the networked process of gameplay, they bring with them a set of unpredictable variables that can only be partially anticipated or afforded by the game's design such as skill level. As such, there is always a sliver of opportunity for hybrid-identity to emerge depending on the player, but the structured narrative and prescribed actions seen in single-player games often keeps the player firmly within the grips of the scripted gameworld. That being said, while there may always be a possibility for hybrid-identity to develop in any videogame play, the opportunities and conditions are not always present in a significantly enough for hybrid-identity to be more than a fleeting sense of 'otherness'. In the end, Faith, Edward and Sparrow will always be a runner, an amnesiac paranormal investigator, and a hero.

## Conclusion

In response to the dominant themes of player- or player-character-centric definitions of identity in game studies, this dissertation has aimed to decentralize the roles of the player and the player-character, flattening the hierarchy of contributors within the networked process of gameplay in order to articulate the multifaceted process of identity construction and development in single-player videogames.

Over the course of this research, I have aimed to accomplish several primary goals: to set out to understand the process of identity construction and development in single-player videogames; to explore which types of identity that have the potential emerge during single-player videogame play; and to determine whether or not single-player videogames had the potential to facilitate the emergence of hybrid-identity as defined expressly through MMOG play and in what capacity. A second, but equally important goal of this dissertation was to develop an analytical framework that would facilitate research (and analysis) specific to single-player videogames and identity that could be applied across game titles and genres and would take the played-experience into account.

In order to accomplish these goals, several methodological steps were taken. First, in order to contextualize the concepts and theories that would be used throughout this dissertation I outlined definitions from a range of disciplines that shaped the meaning of each concept and theory within the scope of this research. Secondly, I articulated the definitions of identity that were typically employed in game studies, and outlined the methodological framework that would be utilized as an analytical lens for gameplay analysis.



With conceptual definitions and methodological tools in hand, three, in-depth and systematic gameplay analyses were performed. Through an analytic auto-ethnographic perspective, gameplay analysed focused extensively on three distinctively different games, *Mirror's Edge*, *Alone in the Dark*, and *Fable II*. The analyses demonstrated that within the three games selected, hybrid-identity in single-player gameplay is fleeting, if present at all. It has also been demonstrated that the more control the player has over narrative, character development, and gameworld there is a higher chance that hybrid-identity will emerge, if only to a small extent. Finally, as suspected, multi-player gameplay as seen in *Fable II*, significantly increases the potential for hybrid-identity to emerge as well as its chance to become referential. However, the complex nature of networked videogame play, when considering a wide range of elements, has the potential for different types of identities emerge increased.

Methodologically, the individual systematic analyses presented the opportunity to expand on the original framework by focusing on played contexts and designed elements that are specific to single-player games, and to the particular games used for analysis. In implementing the framework as a guiding analytical lens it was established that gameplay is an expansive networked process that includes at least four planes of interaction; the framework, the game-specific elements, the focus of gameplay, and the mediating technology. The framework consists of interactions between the *player/player-character*, *player/game environment*, *player-character/game environment*, *player-character/non-playing-characters* and in some contexts, the *player/player*. The 'game-specific elements' includes, but is not limited to the avatar/player-character, inventory and combat systems,

narrative, audio/visual elements from a perceptual level, levels and types of control, point-of-view, etc. The ‘gameplay focus’ encompasses player-centric, player-character/avatar-centric, and game-centric foci of play. Finally, the mediating technology which includes the console, controller and screen, etc., which acts to frame the overall play experience.

These four different planes of interaction all exist within the networked process of videogame play and contribute in some manner or other to the emergence of a range of different identities. Not all forms of identity that emerges from gameplay necessarily belong to or reside in the player or the player-character. Through the introduction of hybrid-identity, it has been suggested that there is the potential for an identity to develop from within the interactions of the entire networked process and not solely within the *player/player-character* relationship.

### *Future Directions*

This dissertation has demonstrated the need for more systematic analyses of single-player games in order to further understand the processes of identity construction. By focusing on different titles across genres, through homogenized comparative analyses facilitated by the methodological tools developed throughout this dissertation, it will be possible to have a better understanding of how identity is developed through the networked process of gameplay, and of which types of identities are afforded by different titles and genres. A more extensive range of titles and genres will also work towards understanding the extent to which hybrid-identity can emerge in the broader context of single-player videogames.

With a more expansive, rigorous method of analysis in hand it is also possible to return to where it all began. Traditionally, MMOG's offered the player an open-ended style of gameplay within a particular theme that often, but not always, fell within the fantasy genre. Although gameplay centered on quests and story lines that contextualized and justified the gameplay, early MMOG's were often narratively broad and branched out over time. Over the past several years, there has been an increase in games that are bound by pre-existing narrative conventions as seen in both *Star Wars* MMOG's (Sony's *Galaxies*, 2003-2011, and Bioware's *The Old Republic*, 2011). While all MMOG players still have the same milestones (levels, available quests, the attainment of special armor and weapons, etc), and they all have access to the same areas of the gameworld (appropriate for their levels), is there still the same range of player freedom in a narrative that has a cultural history that precedes the MMOG? How does a more structured narrative influence the potential for hybrid-identity to emerge within the massively multi-player context?

Contemporary MMOG's have also changed in other ways since 1999. Player subscriptions have swelled from a few hundred thousand to significantly exceeding millions. While the assumption would be that MMO gameplay would become more social in consequence, evidence suggests that it has had the reverse effect in some cases. In order to accommodate an expanding player-base from a broader range of backgrounds with varying amounts of time available to dedicate to play-time, MMOG designer's have attempted to cater to a more generalized player.

Player commitment to one player-character has also decreased as it has become easier to develop a player-character to the maximum level of a game. In turn, players often

have more than one high-level character. What does this do to the nature of hybrid-identity?

With the shifting nature of player commitment, community, and sociality in MMO gameplay, what happens to the shared imagination and collective memory of a player community? What are their effects on stabilizing (or destabilizing) hybrid-identity?

By returning to MMOG's with a extensive set of research tools designed specifically to deconstruct the intricate networked process of videogame play, it is possible to address how these changes, among others, alter or influence the potential for hybrid-identity to emerge. Finally, as more and more single-player game titles move towards the inclusion of a multi-player option to be played on networked consoles and computers, it is important to explore the closing gaps in design and played experience between single-player games with a multi-player dimension and the increasingly solitary nature of MMOG's.

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