STORYTELLING in VIDEO GAMES

The Art of the Digital Narrative

AMY M. GREEN

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Storytelling
in Video Games

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The Art of the Digital Narrative

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To Ben—
For over two decades now,
we have walked this world together.
I hope for decades more. With much love.

To Finn—
You are truly the ultimate and original Gamer Dog.
We have passed many hours with you
curled up asleep next to me as I explore a digital world.

To Thressa—
Your knowledge, insight, and heart
make you the finest editor I could have hoped for.

And finally, to all my students past, present, and future—
I hope I have made as positive an impact
on your lives as you have made on mine.

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Preface

I am a lifelong gamer. Some of my fondest memories are of me, at perhaps eight years old, happily playing for hours on my Coleco Vision. At the time, it represented the height of technological achievement and I was mesmerized. I had also always been a voracious reader, so for me, video games represented a new dimension and outlet for my imagination and love of stories. I could lose myself in video games as readily as I could books. Granted, the video games that came out during the 1980s look primitive by today's often photo-realistic standards, but despite such technological limitations, these digital worlds proved irresistible. As I grew older, I continued to game, moving from my first gaming systems into systems like the PlayStation, the Nintendo 64, and others. The present day finds me gaming primarily on my Playstation 4, with infrequent forays into computer gaming. I have no reason for this other than that I grew up playing on a video game console and have maintained a preference for that form ever since. As I have grown up with video games, so too have video games themselves continued to grow up and to evolve as a form. While not all video games have storytelling as their primary purpose, those that do represent an area of critical inquiry for those of us invested in the study of storytelling.

While I always had gaming with me as a hobby—and an involved one at that—I initially took quite a different path professionally. I completed a Ph.D. in literature with an emphasis on Shakespeare and the novels of Henry James. It was during the time in which I was a doctoral student that my love of video games began to become more of a central focus for me professionally. I knew what many gamers had known for years: that video games were increasingly telling powerful, culturally relevant stories. Yet the academy had certainly not embraced video games with any degree of traction and scholarship related to video games was still relatively thin and tended to be written for other video games scholars. There was little opportunity to cross discipline divides and to demonstrate, for example, why a literary scholar might also want to consider digital narrative as a form. Afraid that a leap into a narrative

study of video games would be something akin to professional suicide, I remained on my relatively safe scholarly path for a bit longer, at least so far as publications and projects were concerned. Then *BioShock Infinite* was released in 2013 and it was clear to me that I could not ignore the powerful storytelling in that game, and in the many others I had played. This book considers *BioShock Infinite* at some length and it still remains, some four years on, a story that I remember, turn to, and revisit, such is the strength of its poignant and heartbreaking exploration of the atrocity human beings inflict upon one another. It is also the singularly rending story of Elizabeth, the young woman who never does end up getting the opportunity to visit Paris. Not really, anyway. Yet rather than spoil that plot point in its entirety, I hope instead that those reading this book will perhaps play *BioShock Infinite* for themselves. It was certainly a turning point for me.

At that point, I moved my scholarly focus fully into video game study, although I had been working with video games prior to that point. Instead of downplaying my interest for fear of what my colleagues might think of me, I embraced a field of study I knew would begin to emerge, in others' eyes, as worthy of investigation. In addition, I began to incorporate the study of storytelling in video games into my literature courses at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, where I am an Assistant Professor-in-Residence in the English Department.

From there, my professional, scholarly, and personal interests aligned in ways I could have not anticipated and which I have completely enjoyed. I find that my students bring to class an excitement and engagement to our studies of digital storytelling. They recognize the importance of video games as storytelling vehicles and love the challenge of studying these games seriously and in a university setting. In addition to my work considering digital storytelling in my courses, I have continued to publish articles on the subject of video games, with a special focus on examining video game titles in the same way I would investigate a novel: with a focused and considered analysis. In addition, I have presented my work with video game studies in public lecture forums, including a TEDx Talk. In addition to this book, I have a second monograph, its focus the exploration of trauma and PTSD in *Metal Gear Solid V: Ground Zeroes* and *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*, which should be in print before the close of 2017.

This book represents what I think is most intriguing and important about video game study: digital storytelling. As such it takes a broad focus considering intersecting areas of inquiry: those features of video game play that are unique to the form, how those particular features inform video games as digital narratives, and analysis of numerous video game stories to connect the more theoretical and structural aspects of gameplay with careful consideration of video games across a number of forms and genres. The book divides

video games along their gameplay times as a means to consider how storytelling might differ in a game that takes a player 100 hours or more to complete, versus one taking perhaps just a couple. Finally, a number of different forms of digital stories are considered, from games allowing players consistent ability to make choices impacting their individual games, to those offering less profound intervention on the part of the gamer, to those which provide no choices at all to the player. Each of these forms engage the player, so the issue of choice itself does not present as a causal factor to an effective story, but instead serves to change the manner in which one approaches an analysis of the story itself.

I have also placed an emphasis on providing involved and in-depth analyses of a number of video games across genre and form. These include triple-A major releases like *The Last of Us*, to independent titles like *Gone Home* and *Kentucky Route Zero*, to uniquely structured games like *Danganronpa Another Episode: Ultra Despair Girls* and *Steins; Gate*. Rather than explore games solely along the lines of one narrative style or genre, I have opted to look broadly at storytelling in video games to highlight the diversity of the format. Additionally, I have opted to present longer analyses focused on elements like cultural and social relevance, theme, and symbolism. My approach, in this sense, mimics my initial training as a scholar of literature. For me, storytelling remains relevant to us all because it helps to connect us to the larger experiences of being human, for both good and for ill. I believe that this more in-depth focus I provide demonstrates that powerful storytelling in these video games is not accidental or coincidental.

My hope is that this book will appeal to a broad audience, from the academic, to the gaming enthusiast, to the reader who is interested in video games, but has never played one. Video games, at their finest, have the power to move their players via story in the same way that literature, film, and television do. They leave the gamer yearning for that fictional world, those characters, and the power of their narratives. And so it is for me when I hear "La Vie en Rose" and think again of Elizabeth from *BioShock Infinite*.

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Digital Storytelling and the Importance of Play

As recently as a decade ago, academics from many disciplines, including English, history, computer science, and media studies as a brief but incomplete list, would have been hard pressed to have invested time in the study of video games. This is not to say that such investigations did not already exist, because the study of video games, as a whole, was beginning to enter into its own as a form worthy of serious and focused study. The reasons for this prove challenging to fully pin down, but are perhaps most easily explained as follows. Early iterations of video games, while sometimes working through compelling and interesting storylines, lacked the necessary technological complexity to allow for the convergence of immersion, visuals, sound design, gameplay design, and storytelling that their modern counterparts have. Matthew Kapell notes of the ludology and narratology divide that tends to inform discussions and approaches toward game study that "each scholar in game studies could use the perspective of the ludic to uncover further meaning of the narrative, or the opposite and use the story to elucidate the significance of the mechanics of gameplay" (10). As the body of scholarship covering all aspects of video games, along a scale from the ludological to the narratological,[1] continues to grow, the one inescapable conclusion is that the study of digital storytelling is a vital and growing field of study for the digital humanities scholar.[2] While game studies is a vital and lively field, one continuing to evolve and change as the games themselves come to require more complicated analysis and focus, many scholars, gamers, and non-gamers remain unaware of the existence of such scholarship.[3] This book, then, directly addresses those who are interested in this powerful form of storytelling, from whatever sets of disciplines or personal interests draw them to learn more. Video game studies takes a number of forms along a continuum that has at one end the pure study of mechanics with the other end focused only on storytelling, in the absence of considering the form by which digital narratives are

delivered. The focus of this book lies in forging and exploring the middle of the continuum, in which story remains of primary importance but not at the expense of other important considerations, such as game mechanics and the relationship between the gamer and digital text.[4]

Not all video games tell stories—some simply do not have that as their aim and should not be faulted for it. Others may attempt to tell stories, but fail on a narrative level in the same way that their counterparts in other storytelling formats may prove unsuccessful in presenting a gripping, interesting, or compelling story. However, as the examples that will be studied in depth in this book demonstrate, many video game developers utilize the digital storytelling platform to tell significant and culturally relevant stories. Generally speaking, the study of storytelling tends to be conflated, usually exclusively, with the study of literature. What becomes forgotten in such a single-minded focus is that the study of literature is, at its core, the study of storytelling. The desire to tell stories, to contextualize experience and extrapolate upon it across all possible genres, lies at the heart of what it means to be human. When tracing a trajectory that begins with cave paintings, moves through the oral tradition of storytelling, and ends with digital storytelling, one finds a wealth of human experiences considered, presented, debated, and shared in ways that transcend cultural boundaries and say something of fundamental importance about our shared concerns and humanity. Jonathan Gottschall writes that "story—whether delivered through films, books, or video games—teaches us facts about the world; influences our moral logic; and marks us with fears, hopes and anxieties that alter our behavior, perhaps even our personalities" (148). Certainly, nearly every person can pinpoint a time when a story—no matter its form—had a powerful and lasting impact. Perhaps someone becomes so immersed in a book that he or she stays up all night reading, unable to find the willpower to close off that fictional space, even for a moment. Another may binge-watch a television series, taking in episode after episode due to the strength of the unfolding plotlines. Yet another may watch a favorite film over and over, long after he or she has memorized large swaths of its dialogue and knows the shape of the emotional beats in the story. Digital narratives expose these same tendencies and behaviors in their players: the gamer who plays for hours or who restarts a game immediately upon finishing to experience the story again, or the player who completes multiple playthroughs of a favorite game. Thus, digital storytelling also explores the human experience.

The close and focused study of digital storytelling places important attention on this form of modern storytelling by viewing video games as more than just the sum of their mechanical parts. For the purposes of this book, story is the primary form of consideration, with mechanical, or gameplay, elements considered in terms of how they may or may not serve that

story. Ian Bogost considers that "a reformulated version of the question of ludology and narratology might ask if games need to produce stories, while acknowledging that they might be able to do so" (70). At issue here is the concept of *might*, which hedges bets about whether or not video games really can tell stories. It is this point that needs to be finally, and definitively, set aside: video games are now and have been, in one form or another, since their inception telling stories. Advancing technologies merely allow for continuing degrees of complexity in storytelling. Graeme Kirkpatrick is guilty of lumping all video games together as "plastic objects" (17), and he is wrong in his assertion that games "are only marginally concerned with meanings" (17). While Gottschall focuses on insightful throughways into the power of storytelling, he fails to understand the role that video games are already playing as contributors when he argues, mistakenly, that "the plot of the average video game—like that of the average action film—is usually a thin gruel" (182). He then allows that we are on the "cusp" of greater things, but this both underestimates the stories video games have already been telling with great success and echoes presumptions of many other analysts that video games surely *are not* telling strong stories. Gone are the days—if the accusation were ever really true—in which video games could be dismissed, wholesale, as providing nothing but a mindless leisure activity.[5] Video games today grapple with complex issues, such as American exceptionalism, post-traumatic stress disorder, sexual abuse, the construction of morality, and xenophobia—all themes one would expect to find in literature and film, and they are handled with as much care and consideration in video games as they are in other forms. Lisa Cron argues that the literary concept of theme can be condensed to two overarching questions: "What does the story tell us about what it means to be human?" and "What does it say about how humans react to circumstances beyond their control?" (29). While her discussion probes the traditional written narrative, it proves no less important for outlining what makes digital narratives so compelling for millions of players as a source of escape and connection: an exploration of a shared human experience. The titles discussed in the latter part of this book, despite varying widely across genre, form, levels of choice, and player perspective, are all rooted in scrutinizing the human condition.[6]

At a minimum, digital stories have at least as much reach as their counterparts in some storytelling formats and may well exceed them in others. Jordan Weissmann notes, "The Pew Research Center reported last week that nearly a quarter of American adults had not read a single book in the past year. As in, they hadn't cracked a paperback, fired up a Kindle, or even hit play on an audiobook while in the car. The number of non-book-readers has nearly tripled since 1978" (n.p.). Such a decline in readership represents a somber shifting in attitudes toward written storytelling.[7] Yet this also underscores

the importance of considering digital stories for their contributions to narrative, especially given their broad reach into players who vary across demographic lines and the number of players who engage with them, highlighting the point that these stories can resonate across a wide cross section of players. The 2014–2016 industry data, as compiled by the Entertainment Software Association (ESA), an organization composed of and created for video game and video game hardware developers, show the broad reach of video games. For the three years examined, video game popularity progressively increased. Of note is that the average male gamer was approximately 35 years old, and the average female about 44. Thus, it is not, as many popular media discussions of video games wrongly depict, a storytelling form only for teens. Indeed, some 40 million Americans over the age of 50 play video games, with about 63% of all U.S. households identifying at least one member of the family who plays games regularly each week. A glance at the 2014–2016 list of top-selling console and computer games reflects a diverse mix, including a range of titles focused on digital storytelling. Regarding gender, the ESA reported only a few points of variance from 2014–2016, with their 2016 figures showing a gaming demographic of 59% male to 41% female ("Essential Facts about the Computer and Video Game Industry 2014–2016"). However, no universal agreement has been reached in terms of the gender split. For example, the Pew Research Center shows data much closer to an even divide, as they state, "Contextually, men and women are equally likely to say they ever play video games" (3). What that Pew study also found, however, is that women were far less likely to identify themselves as "gamers." Some caveats about all data related to categorizing and identifying those who play video games must be mentioned here. The ESA's study was expansive and drew from a variety of sales and insider resources to compile its figures, but it was necessarily limited. There is no way to know, precisely, how many people in a given household may play a video game purchased by one particular member. Furthermore, friends or family members may play together or share the experience of completing a game, by either taking turns physically playing or engaging as spectators. The Pew study was also limited by its sample size—they interviewed only 2001 adults for their study (Duggan 6). Given the millions of gamers in America alone, and without considering those worldwide, that number seems restrictive and therefore conclusions may have been derived from data that have been extrapolated too far. For example, fully half of their study participants (1071 individuals) did not play video games at all. It is of little use to ask complex questions about who plays video games, whether video games are valuable, and whether violence in video games is a problem to those who have never played a video game or are only answering based on what they have heard or read discussed elsewhere, such as in news and media outlets. Neither the Pew nor the ESA study—and granted, this was not an aim in either

case—asked any questions or provided any data about storytelling and gaming, either in terms of perceptions of digital storytelling or how important this aspect was in a particular player's choice of game. For example, neither party asked a question like, "What was your favorite story in a video game?" When taken in their totality, data from studies such as these prove at once important and frustrating. What is clear, and consistent, is that video games feature ever more prominently as a source of entertainment and therefore as a source of storytelling.[8]

To bring some of these statistics and demographics more into a context that relates to digital storytelling and the focus of this book, it is helpful to consider specific sales figures of video games whose primary aim lies in presenting thematically rich and complicated narratives.[9] *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* brought in about 179 million dollars on its first day of release. *BioShock Infinite* has sold in excess of 25 million copies since its release in 2013, and this figure does not take into account resales through used game outlets such as GameStop. *The Last of Us* has sold approximately 8 million copies since 2013 and has been widely lauded for its gritty exploration of human morality.[10] As a point of comparison, the critically acclaimed 2015 novel *The Girl on the Train* has sold around 11 million copies. That is not to force the correlation that the number of sales equates to the level of quality—certainly, the opposite could be proved true. As later analyses in this book focused on these three titles will bear out, however, each one represents an important example of digital storytelling. Moreover, the sales figures reflect the reach and impact that this form of narrative has on players both in the United States and across the globe.

One influencing factor making digital narratives so compelling for players as a storytelling medium lies in the inherent role each player takes in the unfolding of the story. Massachusetts Institute of Technology's professor Henry Jenkins asserts of this fundamental role of the player, "But in playing a game, we choose what happens to the characters. In the right circumstances, we can be encouraged to examine our own values by seeing how we behave within virtual space" (n.p.). Jenkins evokes complex and wide-ranging applications in studying the relationships among player, story, and virtual world. The complexity in the study of video games and digital storytelling lies with the myriad forms these narratives may take. No one set formula of analysis or approach can reasonably be applied in every instance. Jenkins specifically references here those games that allow the player a broad range of choices within the narrative, which can then have varying degrees of impact on the story,[11] but not all digital narratives offer players this degree of specific influence, nor is it necessary for a compelling, relevant narrative, or one which otherwise meets the overall idea of considering one's own values, culture, and the like when measured against what happens in the digital story. Allowing

player choice, however, can deepen the impact of a given digital narrative in unexpected ways. Of special importance is that "narratives have the peculiar quality of making readers (players, viewers, *interactors*) care a great deal about the events they represent" (Holland, et al. 38). Upon closer inspection, this hallmark of narratives is perhaps not so peculiar after all, but is instead an inherent part of the human experience of the world. Lisa Cron argues, "We think in story. It's hardwired in our brains. It's how we make strategic sense of the otherwise overwhelming world around us. … Rather than recording everything on a first come, first served basis, our brain casts us as 'the protagonist' and then edits our experience with cinema-like precision, creating logical interrelations, mapping connections between memories, ideas, and events for future reference" (8). Although she is specifically discussing written stories, her ideas prove relevant to the study and understanding of digital narrative as well. The human brain wants to perceive the world around it as organized around storytelling, albeit a world in which each individual exists as the star of his or her own story. When people are asked about their day, most will respond by pulling together a number of events, perhaps polishing some or omitting others, presenting to the inquirer a story-like account, as opposed to a list of otherwise dry facts. Digital storytelling provides an analogous fictional experience to the one for which the human brain already has a predilection, an experience made all the more powerful and visceral as technology continues to push the boundaries of the virtual and the real.

Iterations of choice in digital storytelling eschew one fixed and consistent form. Instead, they vary from game to game so that the specific set of choices before the player serve the narrative, adding to its depth rather than becoming a point of distraction. Choice-based games are examined in greater detail later in this book, but establishing some points of consideration regarding iterations of choice and their impact on narrative are important here in these opening pages. *Firewatch*, a narrative-based game taking about four or five hours to complete, serves as an example in which even relatively simple choices, those grounded in choices the player makes during conversations, ask the player to consider the personal source of their selections and their impact within the fictive space. The game is played from a first-person perspective, meaning that the player sees the world as if he or she were really inhabiting it. In this case, the player embodies Henry,[12] who takes a summer job in 1989 as a fire lookout in the Shoshone National Forest to escape the tragedy of his wife's decline from early-onset dementia. The game's opening segment imparts that Henry is, in many important ways, a coward by taking the player through Henry's relationship with his wife, from their first meeting until those first terrifying moments when she first becomes confused and disoriented. As part of his escape from the obligations and responsibilities

of his life, Henry forms an increasing, if not dysfunctional, bond with his boss, Delilah, but this relationship is a fictive construct, existing only via their verbal communication on walkie-talkies. Each of them is guarded and presenting to the other an idealized self, too emotionally choked off to attempt to forge a more genuine relationship. In reality, Henry seeks escape from responsibility and his wife's decline and death by participating in a prolonged commune with nature, while Delilah is a high-functioning alcoholic who is drunk during many, if not most, of her interactions with Henry. Numerous player choices involve shaping Henry through these conversations and deciding what kind of a person he will be. Given that he has abandoned his wife's medical care to her family, he enters the narrative untethered and guilt-ridden over his emotional inability to be present with her. The player can choose to have Henry respond to work-related situations in ways that are aggressive or dismissive of their importance or by following strict job protocols. Early in the game, Delilah sends Henry out to deal with someone or a group of people who are setting off fireworks, thus creating an intensely dangerous situation in the water-starved forest. Regarding how he may deal with the offenders, Henry has the option to ask Delilah if he can "kick the shit out of them" or "write them a ticket" or to indicate that he is "not really into discipline." Each dialogue choice provides only a hint at how the wider conversation may unfold, so the player cannot be completely certain of the impact of any single choice. When Henry finally finds the offenders on the lake, he discovers that they are two drunken teenage girls, Chelsea and Lily. They are rude and condescending to Henry, implying that he is a pervert for watching them. In response to their taunting, the player can opt for the dialogue choice, "You don't know a damn thing about me!" This response focuses attention on Henry's defensiveness about his life and his choices, marking him as quick to anger and easily baited. The player will then have the option to become destructive, breaking the teens' stereo out of spite. Alternatively, the player can eschew all aggression in the situation and instead have Henry warn the teens not to set off any more fireworks or risk serious legal trouble. He can confiscate all remaining fireworks on the shore and at their nearby campsite, so the danger, given that they appear to have used all the fireworks they had with them on the water, is eliminated without any further conflict escalation. While these choices do not shift the overall narrative arc, they do have profound weight on the shaping of Henry as a person during this sequence of events, in his personal conversations with Delilah, and throughout the game. Thus, players are called on to decide the kind of a person they want Henry to be and by extension, to consider the same about themselves. Soren Johnson asserts that "ultimately, designers need to recognize that a game's theme does not determine its meaning. Instead, meaning emerges from a game's mechanics—the set of decisions and consequences unique to each one" (33). However,

such a divide is too concrete to prove applicable to games on a broad scale, and its shortcomings as an overarching approach to digital storytelling can be applied against the example of *Firewatch* and its system of choices. Certainly, the game's choices are unique to it—one would not expect to pick up a different game and face the same set of choices regarding the young women and the illegal fireworks. That being said, it is better to think of mechanics as serving theme. The mechanics themselves do not possess meaning on their own—they are part of a larger, interconnected system by which a digital story takes shape.

Choice-based digital narratives, though, do not hold a place of primacy over their counterparts offering little to no choice within the game. Circling back to Lisa Cron's ideas, potent storytelling hinges on its ability to connect a person to a fictive space via recognizably human struggles as filtered through a believable, understandable protagonist.[13] To that end, a video game may offer no choices at all to its player,[14] as is the case with *The Last of Us*, yet still be powerful and evoke feelings of devastation despite this. This book explores with equal intensity both choice and non-choice-based forms of narrative and focuses on what makes their stories individually successful, as opposed to claiming that it is form alone that marks the success of digital storytelling.

Given that digital narratives have broad reach and resonate across a diverse, global audience, the academy needs to turn a more serious and sustained focus toward digital storytelling and video games, specifically toward video games as a storytelling vehicle. The study of digital storytelling is both forward-looking, with regard to its being an iteration of the digital humanities, and increasingly visible, as

> recent developments in new-media studies and narratology have removed some of the stigma that was once attached to gaming within the academy, but digital games are still considered by many in the humanities as frivolous (and monstrously violent to boot). It becomes harder to maintain this perspective as the narrative complexity, play strategy, and game "feel" (as developers call the gestalt of gamer and game interaction) become more developed, culturally significant, and even world-enriching [Burdick et al. 52].

Changing the view of the academy on a large scale, across disciplines, is still unfolding. It is these misapprehensions—that video games are, effectively, all "violent" and inherently a lesser, more "frivolous" activity— that still need to be overcome, given their persistence among those not specifically focused on video game study.[15] As such, digital storytelling merits further consideration in the same academic departments—English, history, psychology, and indeed many of the liberal arts—that consider other forms of storytelling an important vehicle for understanding our human experiences.[16] Tzvetan Todorov resists strict and unyielding definitions of "literature" when he

argues, "In the broader system of a given society or culture, an identifiable element exists that is known by the label *literature*. Have we thereby demonstrated that all the particular products that take on the function of 'literature' possess common characteristics, which we can identify with legitimacy? Not at all" (*Genres* 2). Todorov's ideas are not presented here as a proposal that games are "literature," as they are not simply read on the page, which is the main attribute given to that which is broadly and recognizably thought of as "literature." Todorov's implications, though, require those of us in the humanities to free ourselves from the idea that there are no new storytelling forms worth considering beyond the written page and film.[17] Frans Mayra argues, "Many of the 'ludologists' are actually coming from the field of literary studies and narratological research, and perhaps precisely for this reason are particularly sensitive to the limitations of those approaches. Nevertheless, games are clearly different from any traditional narrative" (9). However, his conclusions are a bit too reductive and pit academics approaching game studies from different disciplines against one another in ways that need not be and in ways that do not exist in reality. These ideas also privilege the ludological over the narrative, which reduces video game study to an "either/or" scenario such that one *either* considers only the mechanics of a game *or* examines story in the absence of acknowledging the inherent confluence of technology, game, and player. The key to resolving this issue lies in a modified approach to the study of digital storytelling, one which encompasses elements of study applied to film, literature, and video games, with the latter considering both mechanical and storytelling. Digital narratives are not literature because they have the visual and aural dimensions found in film combined with the elements of immersion and agency found exclusively in the video game form. Kurt Squire tracks the development of the gamification of the classroom and educational experiences noting,

> Underlying this move toward game-based learning environments is more than strategic opportunity or marketing; the shift toward games also entails intellectual recognition among many that they represent experiential learning spaces, spaces where learners have rich, embodied, collaborative, and cooperative interactions where they think with complex tools and resources in the service of complex problem solving (Gee, 2003; Squire, 2003). Gee argues (2004) that, as games become more complex, they have begun using intelligent tutors, scaffolding, and affinity groups for learning to help players understand their increasingly sophisticated interfaces and systems ["Video Game–Based Learning" 102].

While this book seeks to consider video games themselves as the artifact of study, Squire's thoughts dovetail with this aspect of game study. The study of digital stories as artifacts in and of themselves necessarily connects with and leads to broader implications for video games and issues of gamification. Rather than considering narratological approaches as limiting, it is better for

the video game scholar to be cognizant, in all explorations of digital storytelling, of how its unique components all exist to add dimension and depth to a story.

The study of digital storytelling proves powerful in its ability to forge a unique relationship among scholars, players, game developers, and other stakeholders in the creation process. Walter Holland states that "game theory seems to be teetering on a threshold: many academics want to see game theory establish itself as a predominantly academic discipline, while others seek to broaden the conversation between game designers, consumers, journalists, and scholars" (26). This important point provides both converging and dissenting opinions. Tipping too far to either side of Holland's equation would prove detrimental to the study of video games as a whole. Academic consideration of the types of stories video games tell and why they have relevance is an important component of the discussion of the form. Yet players and their experiences cannot be divorced from this process any more than game designers can be. In the same way that the literary scholar may seek reader responses or author interviews, or the film scholar may look at reviews or interviews with directors and screenwriters, so too does the video game scholar need to always remain cognizant of the important and fundamental nature of stories as human experience. Giving digital narratives a proverbial place at the academic table—one that is both thoughtful and wide-ranging—is critical because "gaming literacy reverses conventional ideas about what games are and how they function" (Zimmerman 24). As has been mentioned, entrenched ideas about video games—frequently negative and focused on the belief that video games are either trivial or inexplicable—persist. Trent Hergenrader urges video game scholars to approach their studies with flexibility as he asserts,

> Even though an examination of rules and processes should be part of any rhetoric analysis of games, this does not mean we must discount other types of critical examinations; quite the contrary, games can and should be critiqued both at the level of language as well as for their representations of people, places and things. Scholars are equipped to bring forward all manner of theoretical frameworks from various disciplines: film studies, communication studies, rhetoric, literary theory, art history, feminist theory, economics, critical theory, visual studies, philosophy, psychology and more. When we add the subjective experience of the player interacting with the game–the choices she makes, the strategies he attempts–then a game becomes an even more robust, multivalent text capable of sustaining many different types of readings [31].

This means that sharp divides across ludological and narratological lines must necessarily be eased, for the larger benefit of both avenues of video game exploration. Frans Mayra delineates a note of divide that, along with other arguments stressing a distinct point of departure between ludology and

narratology, proves too limiting of video games and storytelling: "Games constitute similarly interactive cultural systems, with a specific emphasis on meaning-making through player action (ludosis), as contrasted with meaning-making as decoding of messages or media representations (semiosis), typical for such cultural systems as television shows or contemporary poetry" (19). The academy, at its finest, serves to connect more complex ideas to a wider audience and especially in the case of video games, so often the subject of inaccurate and sensationalized media reporting, can convey the importance of digital storytelling to students, other academics, and the public alike.

A pressing need now exists for those in academia interested in the study of video games from whatever particular focus, whether more ludological, more narratological, or somewhere in-between, to continue to showcase the importance of gaming, both as a cultural artifact requiring study and also as a pedagogical tool. Shannon Carter, Jennifer Jones, and Sunchai Hamcumpai argue that within the overarching umbrella of digital humanities, there exists among its constituent pieces "a 'shared history of marginalization,' 'shared focus on the sometimes unglamorous, hands-on activities such as writing, coding, teaching, and building' (Gold 2012), an interdisciplinary origin story, and a deep commitment to the pedagogical that is atypical elsewhere across the humanities" (37). However, the different disciplines sharing that space often end up at odds with one another over purpose and territory, especially between the areas that are more "digital" or technologically based and those that are more centered on writing. Video game study, especially as it relates to the study of storytelling, draws together these two contested fields. These authors further assert,

> DH [digital humanities] cannot be defined by a discrete and agreed-on set of methods, epistemologies, and approaches because no such agreement exists. Indeed, DH is "neither in fact nor in principle a discipline" but rather what people who identify as DHers—those who "share a common bond as humanists" combined with "a shared interest in texts and the use of computational technologies to explore and understand them" (Alvarado 2012, 53, 51)—actually do to carry out the work that emerges from these shared interests [39].

Of important note here is a call to find throughways across disciplines, rather than shore against them, given that video games themselves cannot be studied completely when they are boxed into only one or two particular analytical lenses. Certainly, video game study within the academy itself—from a point of view of academic positions and offered courses, as opposed to published scholarship—can often appear marginalized and that can be avoided only through partnership not only across the differing fields of the digital humanities but also among those who focus specifically on video games. The study of digital storytelling often appears to exist in a liminal space, straddling the boundaries of digital humanities as well as more traditional liberal arts fields,

such as English, history, and sociology. Despite the legacy of gaming scholarship in existence, questioning eyebrows are often still raised both within the digital humanities and in more traditional departments when the matter of digital storytelling comes to the fore.

In addition to perception, another issue facing the digital narrative scholar is the constraint imposed by the limited resource of time. Scholars focused on the study of digital storytelling must *necessarily* complete the game they are analyzing. This can certainly provide a challenge in that many narratively rich games can easily take 40 hours or more to complete, and a fuller survey of digital storytelling must be broad in scope, sampling games across genres and across differing playtimes. Some games, such as *Fallout 4*, may well take close to 100 hours, when taking into account both main quests and side quests, the sum of which are necessary for a thorough understanding of the game's complex exploration of post–9/11 American insecurities. While that can be a daunting time commitment, full completion of the game is obligatory. In the field of literary study, for example, no critic who tries to publish or discuss novels that he or she has clearly not read carefully, or at all, would be taken seriously. Reading a Wiki-like synopsis would never be allowed to substitute for the experience of reading critically as a fully engaged researcher. So too must be the case with the study of video games. It may be tempting to resort to watching "Let's Play"–style videos that are widely available online.[18] While these could arguably show a very diligent viewer the entirety of the gameplay, they defeat the entire purpose of playing. Video games are unlike their counterparts in literature and film *by their very nature* of requiring input from the player. Second-hand viewing does not substitute for the required active engagement and essentially turns video games into films for viewing, which they are not. Without the first-hand experience of playing the game in its entirety, no scholar's work can be truly complete.[19]

Examining digital storytelling by considering all of its constituent pieces forms a compelling line of inquiry. One of the challenges already considered involves how those pieces are contemplated and how they may then fit together so as to further an understanding of a video game as text. Another concern centers on the issue of how to frame a discussion of a digital narrative as a bounded object. First, all games, even open-world games with randomly generated quests, are bounded, meaning that they do not simply continue forever with no end, even if the repetition or appearance of side quests might allow the game to function in a type of perpetuity. This means that no game possesses infinite locations or types of quests or plot points. In a game such as *Skyrim*, for instance, the player will eventually be sent on a side quest that happens in a location he or she has already visited. Or the player may receive a quest that is similar to a previous one, for example, a "clear out the bandits in this location"–type of quest. Technology is not at the point, nor is it likely

to be, in which quest types and locations are literally infinite. Such an outcome may not prove desirable in a larger study of storytelling, given that it would allow for no real resolution of tension or plot, offering the protagonist no chance to resolve his or her story. An ever-unfolding story may well lose its center, becoming less of what might be properly deemed a story and more of a series of events related along the commonalities of location, possibly character, but in a way disconnected from having a larger impact. In addition, a core text can definitely be ordered in even the most broadly constructed open-world game. In most instances, the open world is organized around some set of quests or goals that move the player to different locations before he or she even begins receiving side quests, and it is this set of main narrative points that complicate the plot, introduce the protagonist and his or her struggle, and help acclimate the player to the particular themes and plot beats critical to the unfolding of the story. Artifacts in the world may also form stories. So while it may be true to say that one static and fixed chronological text may not exist in some open-world games, constructing a text is certainly possible and would be static in that certain plot beats would remain at fixed points. For example, in the narrative structure of *Fallout 4*, the player cannot complete the "Unlucky Valentine" main quest until the "Jewel of the Commonwealth" quest has been completed. The reason for this is simple: the player *must reach* Diamond City, which is the subject of the latter quest, before being allowed to initiate the quest with Valentine, which also takes place in Diamond City. To say that digital narratives may not exist as fixed texts should never be taken to mean that they are inherently chaotic storytelling forms.

It is not just within their narrative schema that digital storytelling differs from other forms of storytelling. Video games require player specific forms of investment unique to the form to unfold. Certainly, that may seem like a given, and the idea of "player" is fundamentally tied to the action of playing through any digital narrative. What tends to be either ignored or set aside, however, is the importance of the act of play itself. Too often, any leisure activity—anything that has the appearance of play, as opposed to something that meets the more nebulous definition of being a meaningful activity—is regarded as a waste of time. There is work and there is play, with video games falling into the latter category in ways that reading a book could be spared. Unfortunately, those who play video games are often labeled as time wasters. Part of that attitude stems from a lack of understanding or an unwillingness to consider that gaming—indeed even play more generally—can be meaningful. There is also a broader cultural sense that if an activity is not producing measurable results or contributing to professional or material success, it hints at a weakness of character on the part of the player. Some leisure activities, such as reading, tend to be viewed more positively, as imbued with value and

meaning. However, such positive regard ignores that reading fiction for leisure was once also considered a wasteful activity. Those who play sports may be admired for participating in an activity that improves their physical well-being. Yet gamers are often omitted from this goodwill and are viewed instead as especially wasteful of their time, slothful, and unthinking. Furthermore, in large part due to caricatures persisting in the depiction of popular media culture, gamers often face the erroneous assumption that their form of play—of meaningful play—is antisocial and harmful. Henry Jenkins explores this issue of the negative stereotypes associated with gaming and the realities in his following argument:

> A growing number of games are designed for multiple players—for either cooperative play in the same space or online play with distributed players. Sociologist Talmadge Wright has logged many hours observing online communities interact with and react to violent video games, concluding that meta-gaming (conversation about game content) provides a context for thinking about rules and rule-breaking. In this way there are really two games taking place simultaneously: one, the explicit conflict and combat on the screen; the other, the implicit cooperation and comradeship between the players. Two players may be fighting to death on screen and growing closer as friends off screen. Social expectations are reaffirmed through the social contract governing play, even as they are symbolically cast aside within the transgressive fantasies represented onscreen [n.p.].

While not all gamers choose to play in a multiplayer format, those who do benefit further from the act of play serving as a means to foster positive traits, such as cooperation and camaraderie.[20] One final thought on the concept of play, as considered by Graeme Kirkpatrick, asserts, "Play is what enables us to conjure something out of nothing" (14). Yet the same may be said of the act of reading, wherein the reader creates entire landscapes, worlds, people, actions, and the like based on the power of the narrative, or even the act of watching a film, during or after which the viewer may feel powerfully immersed in the fictive world. Video games use the act of gaming—the act of play—as the conduit into such powerful forms of creation. Jane McGonigal discusses the many hours people invest in playing games, stating that "in real life, if someone gave you a task that normally took 500 hours of work to finish, and then gave you a way to complete it in half that, you would probably be pretty pleased. But in game life, where the whole point for so many players is to get their hands on as much satisfying work as possible, 250 hours of work is a disappointment" (55). The player's willingness and desire to traverse the digital fictive space and to uncover portions of the story, both directly and indirectly, are vital. Grant Tavinor argues, "It has long been known that one of the principal differences between videogames and traditional forms of gaming is that videogames do not set out their rules and objectives at the outset, but that they encourage the player to explore and discover the rules

as they play" (95). The tasks that players must complete to move to the next stage of the game and, with digital narrative, the next part of the story are not seen as onerous or wasteful, but as meaningful and personally relevant.

Lessons learned during play—whether pursued as a solitary or group activity—have impact in the real world and the spheres of responsibility people inhabit in their daily lives, beyond the impact that a digital story may have, due to its own narrative merits, on players. Sami Yenigun of National Public Radio asserts about the importance of play, "It helps us maintain our social well-being. And it's not just board games that do this, but soccer leagues, or playing paintball in the woods. And not just after-work recreation, but team-building exercises in corporate offices. Playing is how we connect" (n.p.). Of critical importance here is that such activities, these playful times, are not wasted, meaningless, or purposeless. A primary focus of this book lies in exploring digital narratives, those video games that encourage players to participate in stories on an active and engaged level, so as to show their importance as stories and also to introduce the inherent relationship between gamer and game. That level of engagement—that form of play—combines the concepts presented by both Jenkins and Yenigun. Players may opt to generate meaningful connections to others via team play or cooperative gameplay, or by having others watch them as they play. However, even those players who undertake gaming as a solitary activity benefit from the sense of connection gained through the act of playing a digital narrative, investing in its storyline, and following it through to its conclusion.[21]

Turning the focus to emphasize the intersection of gaming and play begins with a consideration of how some commonly understood terms can be more accurately applied, or re-applied, to video games. The first such concept to merit this paradigm shift is "playful." The term as it is typically applied to other situations denotes someone with the character trait of being playful, meaning being lighthearted or perhaps wanting to play some sort of a game. When applied to the relationship between video game and player, the term takes on new meaning, and "the difference is due to the interactive nature of gameplay: in other media forms, individual interpretations are seldom channeled directly back, via playful behavior, to the media content with which the audience interacts" (Jarvinen 88). Additionally, the relationship between the player and the game itself is "full of play," as playful implies. This particular interaction between player and digital narrative defies being restricted by a narrow definition of the form that this may take or by a single game carrying the exact same meaning for every player. The diversity of digital storytelling instead leads to many different types of experiences and interactions players create as they play a video game, even within the same game. Astrid Ensslin asserts,

> Videogames offer all of the elements listed in Hayles's definition of hyper attention: they tend to require multitasking, engage the player in more than one mode of information (written and spoken language, sound, still and moving image), stimulate multiple senses and physiological processes at the same time (including haptic hardware interaction), and they tend to be designed in such a way as to prevent boredom, mostly by confronting players with ever trickier challenges, faster-paced action, and more desirable rewards [39].

She goes on to say, "Unlike maximally immersive, mainstream blockbuster games, literary and other art games are designed so as to allow players to enter the magic circle without fully suspending disbelief or developing a permanent state of hyper attention" (39), but here Ensslin draws a dividing line that proves artificial. Video games are not so easily defined, and what may be deemed a "literary" game is not necessarily marked by a smallness in scope. Indeed, it may be argued that some long-form games, the *Assassin's Creed* series being a prime example, contend with complex issues of history and historicity such that they are as literary as much shorter games intensely focused on only smaller narratives. To be playful, to have a sense of playfulness as a gamer, is necessarily to suspend disbelief and to enter the world of the game. It does not automatically mean that a given player will be wholly unmindful of what is happening in the real world around him or her. Instead, the experience is analogous to reading a book. Some books draw reader attention to an intense degree, while others maintain attention closer to the surface with a connection to text that is more readily broken. This does not correlate, though, to the literariness of a given book, any more than a gamer's attention is more or less intense given the digital story's level of literariness. Instead of forcing such divides, game studies would benefit, in those arenas where story is the primary analytical focus, in considering the inherent connection between player and game. The attentive and thoughtful player must be "playful," then, in the way that the thoughtful and careful reader pays attention to written text. This book will consider numerous examples of these interactions and how stories are created within the digital world, but even these examples serve only as guideposts, as markers against which other games may be considered, and not as the only possible forms of fictive expression within the video game. Indeed, as technology continues to expand and video games grow as a form, new iterations of storytelling and the interactions players will be asked to contribute will also expand.[22]

Playfulness does not refer just to the engagement of player with game, via either a controller or keyboard and mouse. Indeed, structural narrative choices within a video game can also create a powerful sense of playfulness. One example of how playful interactivity between the gamer and a digital story may manifest is found in the specific and new languages created for *Far Cry Primal*. The game is set in the fictional Oros Valley during prehistoric

times—10,000 BCE, according to the game's opening sequence—and thus creates an environment that is at once recognizable as Earth but yet utterly alien. Three competing tribes have been created for the game: the Wenja, the Udam, and the Izila. The player embodies Takkar, a member of the Wenja tribe, who are presented as the heroic characters of the game. They, along with the Izila, have the appearance of more modern *Homo sapiens*. The Udam are an enemy to the Wenja and are brutal and cannibalistic. Their appearance is more like that generally envisioned for Neanderthals, with rougher, more ape-like features. The Udam are slowly dying out due to what they call the "skull fire." The Izila share the same level of brutality as the Udam, but appear to be another precursor, like the Wenja, to modern *Homo sapiens*. Unlike the Wenja, the Izila have a fairly well-developed agricultural system, making them in some ways technically superior to the former tribe.

The narrative's broad scope allows for the player to become intimately connected not only to this ancient world, but to the competing human cultures dwelling on its surface. Takkar regularly interacts with members of all three tribes, and the territory of each tribe overlaps, with the Udam and Izila making incursions as they attempt to claim more land and resources for themselves. As such, each of the three tribes functions as a distinct cultural and language group, yet their proximity coupled with the necessity to communicate with one another creates language overlap. While Benedict Anderson here considers language as it specifically relates to national identity, his thoughts have larger bearing on the construction of languages in storytelling: "If every language is acquirable, its acquisition requires a real portion of a person's life: each new conquest is measured against shortening days. What limits one's access to other languages is not their imperviousness but one's own mortality. Hence a certain privacy to all languages" (148). The player exists as a cultural outsider because language always remains a barrier to complete understanding. The characters have conversations with one another and talk to the player, who embodies Takkar, but it is always at a remove. This concept becomes further complicated by the distance between Takkar and members of the Udam and Izila tribes. While the player cannot understand any of the languages outright, Takkar is himself not fluent in either the Udam or Izila tongues. Tension lies in those places where communication becomes necessary and where more cultural bridges between the tribes may have staved off conflict.

The specific use of created and unique languages in the game is a deliberate choice designed to add depth to the in-game world. Professors Brenna Byrd and Andrew Byrd created the three languages for the game after the game's developers grew concerned about "communication [that] obviously required some sort of language, but everything the designers tried sounded trite or just plain wrong, either too much like modern man or too much like

science fiction" (Hairston n.p.). The professors went back to proto Indo-European languages as their source to generate these three new languages. They "created a true—though imagined—language of more than 40,000 words with established grammar, syntax and structure" (Ibid). While each language is distinct, it shares some basic words or words that are sufficiently similar that the tribes are able to communicate necessary concepts and ideas to one another, at least on some rudimentary level. This circles back to the idea of playfulness in that the player, over the many hours it takes to complete the game, becomes increasingly familiar with the languages, especially with that of the Wenja. Because the languages are functional, and not set up nonsensically or with nonsense words, the player's sense of interactivity increases as the game unfolds.[23] The use of language in the game is further heightened by a lack of the standard music-based soundtrack heard in most games. The game instead focuses wholly on ambient sounds—the noises of wildlife and of both animals and humans moving through the landscape—and the sounds of the languages themselves. Oftentimes, Takkar can hear either allies or enemies at a distance because, in the absence of the typical modern noise permeating daily experiences, very little aural interference stands in the way of the ability of voices to carry. As the player begins to recognize patterns, particular word choices, and even the differences among the three main languages in the game, language serves to create both an immersive and interactive environment, one rich with playfulness. While some of the game's dialogue is translated into the player's language of choice onscreen, the ambient conversations forming the background of the in-game world are not, placing the player in the unique position of engaging with the narrative at a language level.

The term "well played" as it may be applied to video games also warrants consideration as part of a larger understanding of the interchange between player and digital narrative. Drew Davidson and Richard Lemarchand make the following analogy to describe the relationship between a gamer and a video game: "well played is to games as well read is to books" and "well played as in well done" (75). Both of these concepts center on the key idea that a player must voluntarily invest in tasks within a game and to be as complete as possible in exploring the game for it to be considered well played. This is centrally important to digital storytelling, meaning those games that have a critical emphasis and focus on narrative. As previously stated, not all video games intend to tell stories—some, for example, focus strictly on action or platforming. While such games are enjoyable for many players, they are not the focus of this book, which examines instead those games that do place a high level of importance on telling a story. To that end, digital storytelling utilizes the same tools that film or literature may in unfolding a narrative: theme, symbolism, characterization, setting, and the like. However, digital

narratives go further in that they also require the player's investment—the player's willingness to have as a goal ending the story with the game being well played. Marie-Laure Ryan argues,

> In a world design you do not have to accept all the tasks given to you by NPCs.[24] In other words, you do not have to strive for achievement. The world of the game provides ample opportunities for socializing with other players, for exploring its diversified landscapes, and above all for engaging in the kind of relation to space that the French poet Charles Baudelaire called flânerie. While a quest is a deliberate search for specific objects, flânerie is a free wandering open to chance meetings and random discoveries. In a quest, space only exists to be traversed, which means to be negated; in flânerie, it is enjoyed for its own sake and becomes the object of aesthetic pleasure, which should be considered an emotional experience. In an online world, players can spend hours fishing in a calm stream if they are so inclined, rather than trying to progress in the game [114].

Not all games contain an online or multiplayer component, and even when such options exist, players are usually able to opt not to participate in these elements, save for games that are wholly based on multiplayer contact, such as the 2015 release of *Rainbow Six Siege*. That aside, Ryan centers on an issue of primary importance, that of the player engaged with his or her digital landscape and willing to put in the effort to achieve in-game goals. Later chapters in this book focus more specifically on how storytelling unfolds, and how specific digital narratives create meaning through careful and close analysis, designed as a means to provide concrete examples against the larger structures of digital storytelling.

As a prefacing discussion now, *how* a player invests in a digital narrative also bears consideration. There is not one universal, straightforward answer that addresses this issue, due to the variety of video games available. However, the different means by which a player can meet the goal of a "well-played" game can be considered. One of the primary tasks gamers are called on to complete in any video game—but which often acquires deeper importance in those games focusing on storytelling—is to invest in more than just the set of tasks, or quests, required to reach the game's ending. A primary example of this is found in the settlement option offered in *Fallout 4*. The player is given the opportunity to invest time in building settlements throughout the ruined remains of the Commonwealth, which is centered primarily in Massachusetts, although the game's own mythology encompasses other Eastern states, including New England, as part of this overall grouping. The game begins in October 2077 with global nuclear annihilation and the player, who embodies a character of his or her creation,[25] fleeing to an underground bunker. Then, 210 years later, the player wakes from a cryogenic sleep and exits the bunker only to find a ruined wasteland, filled with mutated insect and animal life and toxic water and plant life, not to mention ghouls, dangerous

zombie-like humans who have been hopelessly mutated by radiation. However, as the player investigates, he or she discovers that although conflict is rife among competing groups of survivors, there are also those who want to start the process of rebuilding. The player can choose to internalize and mirror this hope, via his or her embodied avatar, by agreeing to create a series of settlements for the suffering human populace.

Fallout 4 inserts the settlement system organically into the game's larger narrative by making the first settlement construction an inherent part of an early set of missions. The player must complete a series of early quests for a group of survivors called the Minutemen, who envision themselves as a force for peace, and for law and order, and who task themselves with helping to find survivors and providing them with safe places to live. The quests walk the player through the process of establishing a settlement, an involved process in which the player must clear a suitable area of enemies, set up a radio beacon to notify nearby survivors of its presence, and provide resources. At a minimum, settlements require sources of water, food supplies, and beds for survivors.[26] Each of these necessities requires the player to collect the raw materials needed to create them. For example, the player can scavenge the world for fruits and vegetables, irradiated as they are but all that is really available, and then replant those resources in the settlement. Beds require raw materials, such as scrap metal or wood. In addition to the bare minimum resources required to open a settlement to survivors for habitation, the player will likely need to invest in additional upgrades. Settlements are subject to raids by hostile groups of humans or creatures, such as the ghouls, and the player can try to discourage these raids by fortifying the settlement with defenses, from machine gun turrets to staffed guard stations. As is the case with beds, every item placed in the settlement requires a number of raw materials, some rare and difficult to scavenge. The game, not including its downloadable content (DLC), allows the player to build up to 30 settlements, although the game's main missions require the player to prepare the sites for only two of them. Indeed, the complexity and depth of the settlement system functions as its own demi-narrative, one focusing on safety, cooperation, division of tasks needed to run a community, and hope.

For the player who invests the additional time to establish more settlements—not necessarily all 30, but at least several more beyond what is required by the main narrative—the game's main narrative arc acquires deeper significance. The player will spend dozens of hours completing the main and side quests, exploring a world that remains dangerous and largely uninhabitable even some 200 years later. When the player readies a settlement and activates its radio beacon, survivors will slowly find their way to the settlement. Oftentimes, this means that the player may revisit a settlement that had been previously inhabited by only a couple of people to discover the start

of a thriving, albeit small, community. The player—through the act of investing time and in-game resources—has the ability to reshape the game's world through the creation of safe spaces that then evolve into communities. The extent to which the player invests in settlements can, on its own, take many hours. The player can construct more complex buildings, such as homes, and establish trade routes between settlements. Buildings can be further decorated with furnishings such that a settlement could begin to resemble not just a ramshackle gathering of survivors, but a real community. While the settlements are not required—and the player does not need to upgrade the game's required settlements beyond the bare minimum—the player who takes extra time to do so more fully meets the idea of his or her playthrough being well played.[27]

A well-played game may also be one during which the player has carefully monitored environmental clues and details because digital narratives use these, as much as they do characterization and other storytelling techniques, to reveal the full story and its implications. Those types of storytelling structures are examined in further detail in later chapters, but a brief example here examining one particular scene in *BioShock* introduces the overarching concepts involved in considering environment as an inherent part of digital story. In this scene, the player investigates an area in the underwater and ravaged city of Rapture called the Little Wonders Educational Facility, where young girls had been genetically altered, conditioned, and essentially kept as prisoners.[28] The facility lies in ruins by the time the player explores it, but the ruins offer a wealth of knowledge about the horrors perpetrated within. One such clue, seemingly a minor throwaway detail, when considered more carefully by the player speaks to even darker exploitation of the young girls who had been transformed into Little Sisters.[29] The Little Sisters, when not out collecting ADAM, appeared to have been housed in electronically locked rooms. In one such room, the player comes upon a dead male Splicer, Rapture's insane and mutated human inhabitants. He had been stabbed to death with numerous needle guns, which only the Little Sisters used in their gathering of ADAM. This detail compels the conclusion that one or more of them killed him. One interpretation of this narrative clue would find the player concluding that the Splicer was killed after Rapture fell to violence and chaos[30] and the Little Sisters were essentially abandoned in the facility. Another interpretation proves darker. In the alternative interpretation, the Little Sisters had been vulnerable to not only to physical and medical abuse but possibly also sexual abuse. Even if this possibility is only supposed to be taken as a symbolic possibility—meaning that this particular Splicer did not himself try to sexually assault any of the Little Sisters—the power of the moment remains. It provides the player with one additional and heart-rending narrative moment in which he or she considers a society that was originally willing

to exploit helpless young girls and only stopped because its own seething greed tore it to pieces.[31] Lars Konzack argues of *BioShock* that "the game expresses a plain criticism of Ayn Rand's fantasy as a nightmare in which *greed turns out not to be good.* By re-examining it through ethical criticism based on player action and asking the player to reflect on his actions, this game stands out from the rest" (40). The potential and ongoing rapes of the Little Sisters—whether as a literal or metaphoric narrative tool—while they were being indoctrinated and transformed into ADAM collectors scrutinizes the issue of greed, and ultimately the failure of Objectivism, through the heart-rending possibility that the rape of children proves to be just one more allowable outlet of greed in a society marked by its lack of compassion.

The foregoing example underscores that to scrutinize a digital narrative requires close attention to details provided either through the environment, and therefore more in the background, or as overt plot points. That a gamer is both willing to be playful and has a goal of declaring a given game well played proves central to the study of digital narrative and the construction of its meaning and relevance. Diana Mafe mistakenly asserts that "a game can usually be completed without much attention to the plot or cut scenes (non-interactive sections of a video game that typically provide expository information to the player)" (92). Although technically correct at the lowest level, this type of thinking usually loops back to the idea that the narrative in video games can be discarded, or is inherently capable of being discarded, or does not exist in the first place. Technically, yes, it is certainly possible for a gamer to speed through most of a game. Indeed, there is a subset of the gaming world, albeit arguably a small, more niche group, consisting of gamers who perform "speedruns," meaning racing from the opening to the closing credits of a game as quickly as possible, often in competition with one another for the shortest possible playtime. Oftentimes, this involves exploiting glitches in the game to move through portions of the gameplay, and it always involves skipping all cut scenes, dialogue sequences, and the like. This type of playthrough does not focus on any of the narrative details. As an example, the gamer known as Cosmo Wright once held the fastest posted video of a speedrun for *The Legend of Zelda: The Ocarina of Time*, finishing in 18 minutes and 10 seconds. By contrast, an average playthrough may more reasonable take 20–25 hours. Clearly, Wright's goal was to get to the end credits, not to consider the larger mythos of the world or the storyline. However, Mafe's comment that a game may be completed without paying much attention to the plot or cut scenes exposes a flaw in her argument in that this lack of attention to detail is applicable to more than video games. The assertion that such a characteristic is inherent to video games circumvents the opportunity for deeper discussions of video games and condenses all gamers into one erroneously homogenous category. A careless reader can, and unfortunately

many harried students do, skip through vast amounts of reading, ignoring myriad details. For the sake of argument, an English student in a literature course suffices as an example here. That student has been tasked with reading *The Portrait of a Lady*, a densely crafted novel of several hundred pages. The student is behind and has moved quickly through the first 200 pages of the novel in a matter of an hour. The novel in this example certainly would not be considered "well read" by this student. A gamer who opts to perform speedruns or who for whatever reason plays carelessly through an in-depth, narrative-rich game certainly loses out on much critical engagement and the opportunity to delve into the intricacies of a story built over many hours of play and exploration. However, this is not to imply, as Mafe's quote does, that games *necessarily* are constructed such that the bypassing of story is an inherent flaw. Readers cannot be forced to pay attention to a novel, to read it carefully and in its entirety. Nor can a viewer be compelled to carefully watch a film all the way through, without getting up or becoming distracted and missing a crucial scene of dialogue. The fault does not lie with the structure and composition of video games themselves, but rather with individual players who choose not to approach gaming with more care and attention. Thus, the concern should not be that the value of games is predicated on the notion that they *might not be* well played. Rather, scholarly studies in gaming, especially digital storytelling as a specific subset of video game study, must be underpinned by the idea that games *will be* well played. Otherwise, the player will likely miss crucial information and leave a game with a diminished sense of how it functions as a whole.

Undoubtedly, video games require an investment by their players, one which finds those players willing to commit to sometimes long hours of gameplay and close attention to details related to the narrative. In return, video games can provide players with a unique sense of achievement.[32] James Paul Gee asserts that "video games offer players a feeling of achievement in a number of different ways. First of all, they operate according to a very powerful learning principle, a principle we can call the 'amplification of input' principle. In a video game, you press some buttons in the real world and a whole interactive virtual world comes to life. Amplification of input is highly motivating for learning" (64). Gee's analysis of this very specific type of learning provides the scaffolding for a more in-depth discussion of digital storytelling. Unlike other forms of storytelling, video games require and then forge a connection between the player and game. As the player makes choices, explores the environment, or interacts with other characters, the game rewards the player with the next set of steps, the next piece of storyline, or even just the opportunity to enjoy a beautifully rendered in-game world. Therefore, the player, through technology, has more motivation than not to meet the criteria of a well-played game. Jane McGonigal contends that "what the world needs now are more

epic wins: opportunities for ordinary people to do extraordinary things—like change or save someone's life—every day" (247) and that video games are a focal point for such positive achievements. Achievement is a complex psychological feeling, one that likely does not apply to other forms of storytelling and especially not to the depth created by a feedback loop wherein the player's engagement with the game not only moves it forward but also rewards, on many levels, the player's activity. Finally, all digital narratives unfold *because* the gamer interacts with the game and invests the time required for the unfolding.

The achievement felt by the player over the course of and after completing a digital narrative takes on different forms, molded as it is by a particular game's story. *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* provides players with a unique means of gaining this sense of achievement. The game immediately places the player in an abandoned English town, eerily devoid of people, yet flush with evidence of their existence, as if they all just collectively decided to step away. The environment proves especially haunting in that nothing seems out of place—there are no ruined buildings, no fires, no destruction. Within the first couple of minutes of gameplay, the player finds an emergency radio device broadcasting a warning that the Emergency Measure Committee for this area has taken control of the radio and airwaves.[33] Tension exists throughout the broadcast and its hints of governmental oversight and concern, leading to fears of some larger and more dangerous incident, complete with the possibility that the town's citizens may have been detained or stripped of their civil liberties. The overarching plot tells the story of a small town—the fictional Yaughton—being visited by an alien intelligence, thus the government's response to the incident as an emergency. Unfortunately, the alien presence has a lethal effect on all life in the town, from human to animal, and it eventually causes many to simply disappear, as though burned to ash.[34]

The player learns everything in the game either through audio recordings or by accessing the memories of some of the town's former inhabitants via places where an "echo" of an interaction or memory exists.[35] The game's protagonist, Kate, has tried to find some means of communicating with this alien intelligence, hoping that it may understand the harm it is causing. Not until the last scene of the game does the player learn that the entity knew it was causing death but, in its reasoning, was allowing all of these lifeforms to come together as one, joined to the alien intelligence. Kate decides to embrace her fate in the game's closing scenes, lonely as she is and seeking a life filled with connections, unlike the one the player learns she has been living. This ties into an important narrative clue, one that both rewards the player who pays close attention and provides a sense of achievement to him or her should a solution be found. Throughout the game, the player comes upon radios, what the game refers to as "number stations," from which Kate's voice speaks

what appears to be a varying and random list of numbers. Each radio plays a specific number of beeps of either short or long duration before the number sequence begins, and each radio repeats only one particular sequence. An example would be the number string 00 07 03 16 06 preceded by one long- and three short-duration beeps. Given their prevalence throughout the game, the numbers would logically appear to have some degree of narrative importance. However, solving the number codes is not a part of the gameplay, but rather something the player may choose to do to unlock the final part of the narrative. Although there is not any other real context, a player might logically and rightly conclude that the numbers are a code. The challenge for the player, of course, lies in how to even begin to determine what type of cipher these numbers represent and whether they are supposed to be placed in a specific order or left in the order given, with some sort of substitution cipher utilized as the means to decode the numerical strings.[36] The game itself provides only one clue, serving as a hint to both the larger significance of the numerical sequences and their deciphering, and that clue is given only toward the end of the closing credits of the game. Thus, a player who either skips the credits or does not watch them all the way through would miss this crucial means of decoding the other number strings. As the credits come to an end, this sequence of numbers appears:

> 914 2085 231115 156 1 82113114 25914719 451208 238120 19211822922519
> 919 1 19520 156 1620518712152319 1915135 21897820518 1144 1915135
> 491313518 914 2085 315121253209225 218191419 156 20815195 4511851920
> 2015 208513 2085185 919 914 208151915 23815 185131914 1 315121253209225
> 3151815141 208120 192091212 712152319 41521712119 815619201420518

This turns out to be a relatively straightforward alphabetical/numerical cipher[37] that translates to the quote written by cognitive science Professor Douglas Hofstadtler which reads:

> In the wake of a human being's death, what survives is a set of afterglows, some brighter and some dimmer, in the collective brains of those dearest to them. There is, in those who remain, a collective corona that still glows.

The quote places much of the game's narrative events in a fuller, more profound context. It connects to the idea that those in Yaughton still live on in some fashion, even if they are no longer corporeally present. The player has spent the entire game piecing together what happened and learning more about various residents by listening to their memories and perspectives, and this final note allows the melancholy events of the game to take a more hopeful tone, given that no one in Yaughton survived the alien encounter. Although deciphering this particular code and attempting to decipher the other number sequences has no ultimate bearing on the narrative—that is, doing so does not alter or shift events—taking the additional time to investigate

such a prominent feature of the game's environment has the potential, should all of the them be deciphered and properly ordered, to give additional weight to the narrative's thematic elements. It also circles back to the idea of a game being well played in that, after seeing the closing credits, many players desire to go back and pay more attention to the earlier number strings, which certainly could not have been wholly ignored, but may not have been translated or considered more deeply. The other codes in the game, which seem to be Kate's thoughts as she moves toward her decision to join with the alien presence without fear, provide the player with additional insights into her thoughts, such as "The answers are all here. The answers are in the light." Whether Kate has found a true pathway to community and identity or whether she seeks a destructive means to cope with her loneliness remains a point of debate. Her additional thoughts on her predicament lend weight to arguments on either side.

The example from *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* fulfills the ideas related to a game being well-played by a careful gamer who is rewarded with a sense of achievement. Yet video games may also ask the player to reconsider the notion of winning, to move away from the concept of conquering or claiming victory with the least amount of effort and toward a model in which patience and perseverance are rewarded. The player who tries to complete a given game as quickly as possible without paying attention to the various aspects of the game risks missing much of a game's content and is unlikely to be rewarded. James Paul Gee argues of play styles involving speed and little observation, "Video games tend not to reward these models. They stress both nonlinear movement—exploring all around without necessarily moving forward toward one's ultimate goal and the master defined by that goal—as well as linear movement, which, of course, eventually happens, greatly deepened, sometimes transformed, by the horizontal movement" (164). The sense of achievement discussed earlier, then, emerges in the player who takes much more considered time with his or her gameplay. As later chapters in the book discuss in more detail, much of digital storytelling unfolds in optional game spaces and optional or overheard conversations or by searching for environmental clues and performing other activities that deviate from simply completing all the main tasks or levels in a game as quickly as possible.

Alongside their ability to teach gamers about winning, so to can video games teach players about failure, to striking ends. While not all games are predicated on their difficulty, many feature areas of combat or puzzles to be solved that require the player to invest time and energy into strategy and critical thinking. In many instances, the player has to first test a strategy to determine whether it works, and, if it does not, the player must reassess, consider what went wrong, and try again. In some instances, failure may relate more to ludological elements than it does to narrative elements, whereas in

other cases, failure may be more intrinsically tied to the game's narrative structure. However, actions that may well be predicated on failure, or failing multiple times, are not initially apprehended to have merit. Jesper Juul says of failure more generally, "The simplest theory of failure states that failing serves as a contrast to winning, that failure thereby makes winning all the more enjoyable" (237). Despite the idea of achievement gained through perseverance, modern-day culture instead often privileges shielding children, especially, from the sting of failure, thereby also robbing them of the lessons it teaches. Terri LeMoyne and Tom Buchanan assert of the dangers of helicopter parenting, "These parents may appear authoritative in most areas of the child's life, but they stunt independence by performing transactions for their children rather than nurturing the ability to handle tasks generally" (402). The assertion *not* being made here is that playing video games can undo years of damaging parenting styles. However, given the ubiquitous nature of video games and the number of young people who identify as gamers, it is not inappropriate to consider that the gamer who is consistently involved with games—and thus who consistently learns to mitigate failure—is taught a valuable skill that may not be otherwise taught or reinforced in the real world. The act of failing serves as a primary foundation for learning in addition to reinforcing traits such as perseverance and the ability to critically reassess a situation in the aftermath of failure. Joseph Loscalzo considers the intersection of learning and self, arguing,

> Failure gives us the opportunity to see our existence close up. It is a lens through which we begin to see the flaws in our otherwise perfect and perfectly predictable being. When failure gives us this insight, it emphasizes for us the existential threat that constantly stalks our lives, giving us pause to consider how extraordinary life is. For this reason, failure can be therapeutic, forcing us to realize that the world does not revolve around us, guarding against unbridled arrogance, offering the comfort of humility in its stead [955].

His implications are wide-ranging and are centered outside the digital narrative of the video game world. However, throughways exist between his ideas and the importance of failure as it relates to playing video games.[38]

The intersection of failure, the gamer, and the desire to continue exploring a narrative proves to be a balancing act, given that even the most patient player may eventually tire of failing or of countlessly repeating the same areas of a game. The *Dark Souls* series of games[39] focuses on failure as a primary gameplay component and also eschews standard modes of storytelling, in favor of revealing the game's world and mythology primarily through item descriptions. Timothy Torres notes that the series contains "thrilling gameplay and controller-chucking difficulty" (n.p.), an apt means of contextualizing both its unforgiving difficulty and its ability to create a sense of achievement in the player who keeps trying to defeat a given boss or pass

through a certain area. The game series contains no option, as many other games do, to play on a lower level of difficulty. Instead, all players must approach the game within the same parameters. The game series also presents challenges all the way through, without allowing for a point at which the player truly feels at ease with his or her skill level, weapons and armor, or the trials that lie ahead. Indeed, quite the opposite may often prove true in that a relatively easy area to traverse may immediately be followed by a minor enemy who is able to "one hit kill" the player, meaning that the enemy need only hit or damage a player's avatar once to kill him or her in the game. Bob Rehak argues, "avatars differ from us through their ability to *live*, *die*, *and live again*" (107). With regard to the cycle of death and new life in the *Dark Souls* games, this particular mechanic feeds into the player's willingness, or not, to continue to try to navigate the difficult gameplay. The player can effectively be resurrected infinitely, but at great cost, at least upon the first resurrection. It is at that point that the player has the best opportunity to reclaim progress that has been made thus far. Subsequent deaths and resurrections allow the player to continue from the last Bonfire, a take on the otherwise ubiquitous save point, but it becomes a form of starting over new each time. Martti Lahti considers the creation of the avatar and asserts, "this second order of interactivity—the representational presence of the body—seems to provide a sort of (ideological) framework for … corporeal identification and pleasure" (165). Because the games unfold narrative and mythology through finding items and weapons in the game world, the only means by which the player can ever hope to reveal the game's intricacies of story lies in trying to explore as much of that world as possible. The *Dark Souls* series stands in unique contrast to a consideration of pleasure in that the games straddle the boundaries between identification, pleasurable gameplay, and frustration.

The *Dark Souls* games create a type of metanarrative with the player, one which comments upon typical expectations of players as they start and then progress through a given game. A standard pattern in many video games allows a player to navigate an area with relative ease—save for when he or she has to face the boss or major enemy—once he or she has leveled up and has gained familiarity with the mechanics of play. Practice and attention to improvement generally pay off in the form of a game whose difficulty begins to scale with time relative to that investment. However, all the *Dark Souls* games present enemies throughout the game who are capable in many instances of killing the player with one or two blows. The series is unforgiving and offers the player little leeway for different approaches, meaning that there may well be only one particular set of techniques, executed with timing and precision, that will work on a given enemy. Instead, the player has to learn, via failure rather than victory, what strategy will or will not work against a given enemy. This includes memorizing the pattern of attack a given enemy

may follow. For example, an enemy may take a moment to wind up to attack, and then attack the player twice before winding up again. To overcome such an enemy, the player must know precisely when to dodge or use a shield and when to use the window of opportunity available to attack. Tom van Nuenen writes, "According to the game's lead director, Hidetaka Miyazaki, the gratification of winning such a difficult game was a key consideration at its conception. The director emphasized in an interview 'I personally want my games to be described as satisfying rather than difficult. As a matter of fact, I am aiming at giving players a sense of accomplishment in the use of difficulty'" (3). Indeed, the games go further than just forcing the player to utilize a specific strategy to defeat or bypass each enemy in the game because far more is at stake. As the player defeats enemies, he or she collects souls, which is how the player levels up, or gains more power. Without souls, the player would never possess sufficient skills or upgraded powers to complete the game. Upon dying, however, the player immediately loses all souls gained up to that point. The player then has one opportunity to return to the place where he or she had died and collect those souls. Should the player die without reaching those souls, they are lost forever. Furthermore, the player moves through the same area of the game many times[40] and has to gauge how much to risk each time. Since collecting souls is crucial, the player has to consider whether it is better to go back to the safety of a bonfire and use those souls to level up, knowing that the same enemies will be faced again, or to risk losing increasingly more souls that will need to be retrieved the next time through. All of this categorizes this particular series of games as one predicated on failure and frustration, which will not appeal to all gamers. The games do serve, however, as a unique example of how failure, rather than success, can be utilized as the primary mode of gameplay. Failure, while not a primary point of the plot of *Dark Souls*, feeds into its overarching sense of displacement, sadness, and frustration. The games' worlds often feel inscrutable, revealing themselves only in small fragments over the course of many hours of play. While the series does contain overarching, high-level plots, usually centered on a larger struggle of good against evil, it works through those points on a microscale wherein the tiniest margin of victory yields one more piece of information about the world the player's avatar inhabits.

Digital narratives continue to defy attempts to pigeonhole them into one form or type. Instead, they run the gamut from short, intimate stories focused on love or loss to epic games sweeping across vast landscapes over dozens of hours of playing time. While video game scholars focus on the importance of storytelling in this format, the academy as a larger whole, not to mention the general population, still may not realize that video games are telling some of the most profound, compelling, and important stories of the day. This opening chapter has focused on two primary areas: (1) why digital

narrative deserves more consideration and how this can be accomplished, especially with consideration given to storytelling, and (2) how concepts such as "playfulness" and "well played" may be applied to video games. These foundations find form again throughout the remaining chapters of the book, which explore first how video games create a fictive space and then the structures of storytelling. To that end, this book divides games into two overarching categories: the long form and the short form. Long-form games denote those games requiring 40 hours or more to complete, while short-form games offer shorter completion times. The games that will be analyzed in further depth in the forthcoming chapters range from small independent releases to triple A titles with budgets rivaling those of Hollywood blockbusters and always have some broader connection—as great storytelling does—to our human experience and our modern world. Selected examples of games within each chapter are explored at length, rather than merely mentioned in a cursory fashion, to give the reader a sense of the possibilities found in this form of narrative. The final chapter considers how digital storytelling can be incorporated into the higher education classroom as part of the study of the digital humanities.

2

Structural Features of Digital Stories

Agency, Immersion and World Building

The previous chapter introduced some of the overarching concepts involved in the creation of digital storytelling, including the critical importance of play as it relates to unraveling this particular narrative structure. This chapter focuses on the scaffolding elements providing the backdrop against which a digital narrative takes shape. The concept of agency is unique to digital rather than other storytelling forms because the player must not only actively engage with the game but also actively participate such that the game continues to unfold, and the concept serves here as an important starting point for understanding how a video game comes together to tell a story. Immersion and world building are considered next. They are effectively intertwined and interact, with world building providing a primary means for the player to become involved, immersed, in the digital narrative. Video games and the narratives they explore necessarily exist in a space outside the realm of everyday human experience, as all stories do, yet in their most powerful iterations find anchoring points by connecting players to elements of the human experience, regardless of setting or scene, that are associated with what is tangible and lived in the real world. Whereas a video game's disc may be a physical, real object, the game itself remains elusive, inscribed in compact form on that disc. There are no words on a page, electronic or printed. Jean Baudrillard argues more generally of the idea of simulacra, "It no longer has to be rational, since it is no longer measured against some ideal or negative instance. It is nothing more than operational. In fact, since it is no longer enveloped by an imaginary, it is no longer real at all. It is a hyperreal: the product of an irradiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere" (366). In his rendering, the idea of the (physically) insubstantial world created by video games qualifies as hyperreal. Yet this

need not be considered a negative context, as if a real-world experience were lessened by the existence of a virtual one. While the stories contained in video games engage the player in a way that is not physically real and ask him or her to move through simulations of worlds rather than the one around them, these narratives nonetheless transcend the boundary of the digital to impact the player. Further, there is not one fixed formula by which a video game may create agency and immersion, leading to a rich variety of forms these critical elements of digital story may take. The examples presented in this chapter, therefore, do not serve as the only forms that these concepts can and do take. Rather, the examples can be thought of as *categories* of experiences a player may have with digital narratives and can be used to construct a set of guidelines and characteristics against which other digital narratives may be gauged.

The feature that all digital narratives—all video games—share is that they must be played. This may appear at first glance to be a given, a throwaway statement, but the fundamental importance of *play*, discussed at length in the first chapter, cannot be dismissed. As such, the idea of agency works well, on successively complex levels, to describe the interactive relationship between game and player. On the most superficial level, the player has agency simply because he or she must opt to play the game and then continue to decide to complete the mechanical steps to make the game play out to its end. This may involve, for example, the physical manipulation of a game console's controller or a computer keyboard's buttons to advance the game. However, this concept of agency proves far too limiting when considering the game and player relationship. Indeed, the player must always perform *some mechanical action* to allow a game to continue. This can be as simple, in games such as *Dear Esther*, as pushing a limited number of keys on a keyboard to control movement, or as intricate as learning and executing more complex button combinations on a controller during a combat sequence. However, the concept of agency often proves far more complex. Sebastian Domsch states, "When a choice has to be made completely arbitrarily, there is only interactivity, but no (or very low) sense of agency (115)." While the idea has merit, it proves far too limiting and fails to account for a broader understanding of agency as it exists between the player and the digital world. Certainly, games with a high level of player choice can empower a player within that fictive world. Thus, agency is, at its core, a descriptor used to denote power. That being said, throughout the playing of any video game, the player always has power, which can intensify in a game with high levels of player involvement in shaping the story, even when choices or actions are in actuality, or have the appearance, of being arbitrarily made at a given moment of gameplay. However, the varying level of intensity—which also involves the player's emotional reactions to a game and its proffered choices—is not an

effective characteristic by which to deem some actions "interactive" and others signs of "agency." Indeed, as this chapter will consider, games begin with agency—with the very fact that they *must* be played—and use that as a starting point from which to build increasing layers of complexity. Constance Steinkuehler argues,

> At the most basic level, video game play itself is a form of digital literacy practice. If we define digital literacy as it is framed by O'Brien and Scharber (2008), then game play might readily be considered one particularly good case in point. Gaming is the production of meaning within the semiotic resources of the game (Gee, 2007). Gaming is a narrative, hewn out of the "verbs" made available within a game design. Unlike television, books, or any other media that came before them, video games are about a back and forth between reading the game's meanings and writing back into them. In effect, games are narrative spaces that the player inscribes with his or her own intent. From a more contemporary vantage point on literacy, then, games are digital literacy practice through and through (Steinkuehler, 2006, 2008). There is, however, a second important sense in which games and literacy are related. If we widen our focus from the "individual player + technology" to the online community that emerges around any successful game title, we find that video games lie at the nexus of a complex constellation of literacy practice (Steinkuehler, 2007) [61].

At the heart of the digital story, then, lies the player, as opposed to other storytelling mediums that may instead highlight their stories' characters. While a reader, film watcher, and theatre goer can certainly experience a sense of immersion and of being transported into the world of a given story, that iteration of immersion lacks, at its core, the more active and invested sense of engagement that is drawn out by video games. Steinkuehler centers on the concept of the video game as a "narrative space" in a way that articulates the complexities of the digital storytelling form. It might be argued that in other forms of storytelling, the meaning of the story has *already been created*, whereas the digital text, even one that exists in a form offering no choices to the player, is still inherently a *negotiated space*. The player, via his or her agency, advances through that negotiated space to both glean and help create narrative meaning.

The counter-examples to the type of agency required of the player lie in a comparison of video game and film studies and their respective iterations. Torben Grodal expresses it in this way: "the reader/viewer of 'traditional' mediated stories needs only to activate some general cognitive skills, including the ability to have some expectations. The story will proceed even without such expectations. The computer story, in contrast, is only developed by the player's active participation" (139). Certainly, the act of reading a book is an active one, but the reader can read inattentively, skip entire sections of the book, and otherwise participate at a level less than complete. Video games often do not allow for this type of glossing over content. In some cases, the player can skip past full-motion video events, thereby oftentimes missing

important plot developments, but he or she cannot skip, wholesale, through larger sections of the game. Films allow the viewer even more latitude in this regard, as the viewer can get up and move away from the story, leaving it to play on, for a few seconds or a few minutes, with no participant attention whatsoever. The video game, by contrast, will only proceed if the player interacts with it, asserting his or her agency as a participant. Of the intersection between player and digital text, Kurt Squire asserts, "If a hallmark of games is their interactivity, their ability to grant players agency within the narrative fiction of the game world and its rules, then theoretical models need to account for players' actions in creating the experience. Indeed, because play is instantiated only through players' actions, tensions arise over who exactly is the "author" of the game experience" ("Content to Context" 21). Rather than being a more static participant in the unfolding of story, the player instead becomes the focal point, inscribing his or her actions, predilections, and choices onto the game while, in return, the game immerses the player, setting him or her within a fictional landscape experienced through the player's own created avatar or the game's protagonist.

Further comparisons of the difference in agency between video games and other storytelling modes can be found in the experience of going to the theater. Daniel and Sidney Homan, by using what serves as a contrasting example of a playgoer at the theater, state, "When filtering the playthrough his or her own life experiences, needs, agenda, interests, preoccupations, the spectator in the theater has always been a 'player' in the loose sense of that word. But the idea of the spectator's having a direct role in the action onstage or even a hand in the plot, becoming a 'player' in the literal sense as it applies to interactive video games, is of more recent origin" (170). This is an interesting point that takes theatre productions away from the realms of literature and film. Certainly, readers passionately connect to characters with whom they share experiences, and every reader with such a favorite can likely extrapolate with great detail about the nature of that connection. Similarly, viewers can connect to film characters in the same way. Yet in digital storytelling, the player *embodies* a character. This may be a single character presented to the player, as is the case in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*[1] wherein the player embodies Geralt of Rivia. However, the player can also experience a game in which he or she embodies a character who has an ambiguous identity, as is the case of the first-person perspective found in *Dear Esther*, or one in which he or she can spend a great deal of time and care crafting an avatar, as in the game *Fallout 4*.

If agency denotes the player's willingness—his or her choice—to play a game and to subsequently perform all the steps necessary to complete the game, then immersion speaks to the digital story's ability to draw in that player and to invest him or her in the story. Immersion and storytelling might

be seen as inherently tied to each other, but it is better to think of them as interrelated components that together create the digital story. Immersion need not be limited as a reference *only to story-related elements* of the game. A player may become immersed in the environment of the game—its fictional, constructed world—and that immersion can function separately from being invested in the plot, although the two elements frequently merge to form a story borne from both narrative and environmental elements. Alison McMahan describes immersion in this way: "*immersion* means the player is caught up in the world of the game's story (the diegetic level), but also refers to the player's love of the game and the strategy that goes into it (the nondiegetic level)" (68). Yet here, *world* and *story* need to be separated to denote that each element—plot and place—function as separate parts of an interrelated whole and may create immersion in differing ways for different players.

Although one can try to pinpoint a strict set of guidelines by which to understand it, immersion is not necessarily so simply defined, rooted as it is in the singular experience of each gamer. The more ephemeral aspect of immersion lies in the player's ability to become invested in the game itself. In terms of narrative-driven or narrative-centric games, that means that something about the story must capture the attention of the player at a very early point in the game. Studies of storytelling, unfortunately, are increasingly turning away from that which cannot be definitely categorized and defined, and such is the case with a great deal of current video game studies. However, the attempt to strictly categorize, name, and then create theory about forms of engagement with a text—whatever the form—lose the proverbial forest for the trees. Storytelling resonates with the very heart of what it means for us to be human, and therefore no one system of categorization will ever be wholly satisfactory. Georgios Christou examines the interplay between appeal and immersion, suggesting,

> On the other hand, if we consider that immersion leads to appeal, then the player would first have to be immersed in the game, and then find it appealing to continue playing. This would mean that players would need to be patient until they become deeply immersed in a game, implying that there should be different levels of appeal between inexperienced and experienced players of the same game. However, this is not the case, at least in the context of this study. Therefore, we believe that appeal leads to immersion, and as appeal grows, so does the players' willingness to suspend disbelief further and become further immersed in a game [n.p.].

This mirrors a reader's ability to find a point of connection with a text or a viewer's ability to become engrossed in a film. Sometimes, in trying to find strict definitions for concepts such as immersion, the player's emotional engagement, preferences, and sense of identification with the various components of a digital narrative are lost in the quest for a set of unchanging rules.

Another way to explore the issue of appeal is to consider the player's engagement. It can be thought of in this way:

> Engagement is the first stage of immersion, and it contains two barriers, access and investment, that must first be overcome in order to enter this stage. Access is relative to the gamers' preference and is the initial barrier which players encounter, because they need to first like the type and/or style of the game. Otherwise, they will not even attempt to try the game. They will then invest their time and effort into the game and focus their attention on it. As individuals place increasingly more time and effort into the game, they gradually become more focused, thus increasing their engagement with the game [Cheng et al. 235].

The idea of an increasing sense of engagement—of what might be considered a feedback loop wherein the player becomes progressively more invested in a video game over time—hinges on the game's ability to tell a resonant story. Since video games, by their nature, are as visual and aural as they are textual, because many complex digital narratives contain significant amounts of in-game text, those elements must also serve as points of entry—of immersion—into the story proper.

One key method by which digital narratives facilitate a player's immersion lies in the crafting of the game's fictional world and its environment. A sense of place provides a vital point from which the player can then explore and invest in the story. When a reader enters the fictional world of a novel, he or she receives varying degrees of specificity regarding the space and place. Some novels may hinge on the physical sense of place—whether that setting is fictional or found in the real world—whereas others use setting as a background feature. In this latter case, perhaps a few buildings or part of a city may be explicitly described to the reader, along with a few of its denizens, leaving large swaths of the physical setting wholly up to the reader's imagination. The reader may choose to build this fictional world more completely, or simply disregard world building beyond what the author provides. The filmgoer experiences a visual sense of place, but this is always limited by the eye of the camera and what the director has opted to focus on in any particular scene. So while the filmgoer's visual landscape may be more complete than the reader's, both suffer degrees of limitation. The video game proves different in that the player is often—and in the case of games focused on storytelling nearly always—asked to explore the environment comprehensively as he or she uncovers or experiences the story. This means that the player becomes the eye of the camera, able to explore and focus on details that a director may choose to ignore, or show only in passing. If the player finds something interesting in *those buildings over there*, or *in this person standing here*, he or she usually has full freedom to move to that location and observe. While the visual rendering of the game's world lies in the purview of the game's developers, the player has agency over how to experience it.

In the case of *BioShock*, the Splicers provide an added layer of immersion as the player investigates the underwater city of Rapture. The Splicers serve as the game's primary antagonists, because they will attack the player, who embodies a mysterious man named Jack, on sight. However, the player can sneak around some of them, thus avoiding combat, and can also easily hear them as they move around, thereby encouraging the player to pay close attention to both visual and aural cues. Although still vaguely recognizably human, these twisted men and women now roam Rapture "as genetically manipulated 'splicers' [and] they now creep through Rapture's darkened halls bemoaning their lost humanity" (Tavinor 91). Such audio cues—here, "bemoaning"—add depth and a larger sense of tragedy and horror to Rapture. The Splicers persistent manipulation of their own DNA, combined with an addiction to a substance called ADAM, initially heralded as a breakthrough allowing for genetic modification and manipulation, has left the Splicers both homicidally aggressive and bereft. Additionally, the Splicers are all but insane and often appear to be "stuck" in particular moments of their lives. When the player first enters Rapture, he or she is immediately caught off guard. Rapture is in ruins, littered with the dead, but the player initially has no idea what has happened. He or she soon runs into Splicers and begins to unravel the history and fall of Rapture. As the player overhears the Splicers talking to themselves, arguing, and singing, the full weight of their hubris and their degraded state are revealed indirectly to the player, without the game needing to devote additional time to exposition. By listening to the Splicers and the glimpses they share of their lost lives, the history of Rapture, and its hypocrisy, the player gains valuable narrative knowledge about this fictive world in a manner conveying more impact than if these histories and events were given as longer swaths of narration. Rapture's creator, Andrew Ryan, predicated the construction of his underwater city on the principles of Ayn Rand's Objectivism. Foremost among these tenets is the idea that religion is anathema to the progress of the individual and should be rejected. Accordingly, Ryan has outlawed religion in Rapture. However, a player who investigates and pays attention to detail comes across a smugglers' area littered with boxes of Bibles and crosses, which shows a disconnect between Ryan's demands and Rapture's citizens' true feelings. While the environmental clues are important, this point about religion comes frighteningly to life in the Splicers. One male Splicer[2] wanders around sobbing and saying over and over again, "I observe all His commandments." A female Splicer alternates between looking for her missing child, muttering ominous phrases such as "shh…. Oh, no…. Of course you're not dying, my little one. You're just a baby.… Babies don't die," and singing "Amazing Grace." Another plaintively sings "Jesus Loves Me" or laments his previous turning away from his faith with self-incriminations like "I'm sorry Father. I'll do as you say!" When taken in their totality, the Splicers add to

the overall sense of world building, as the player becomes immersed in Rapture and all of its contradictions and problems. Where there was supposed to be no religion, the player encounters numerous Splicers trying to find consolation in faith. A smugglers' cache later reveals Bibles being actively smuggled into the unraveling city. The depravity that has occurred comes into horrifying relief with the nightmare of children being murdered and the citizens of Rapture abandoned to their madness.

The player's indoctrination into the warped world of Rapture begins with a singular and terrifying encounter with a Splicer, one which serves to immerse the player and to establish that the game's fictive space is both brutal and unpredictable. Within the first ten minutes or so of *BioShock*, shortly after the player embodying Jack enters the ruins of the underwater city, he or she first encounters the Splicer. The encounter is both horrifying and disconcerting, as the player has no context for anything that is happening and does not yet have a weapon with which to fight back. The player remains trapped in an underwater travel pod, and, through its large window, witnesses the Splicer brutally and viscerally murder one of Rapture's other surviving residents. This sequence takes place in near darkness, as the power to this section is cut off, adding to a sense of terror. Afterward, the Splicer, a female, peers in through the window and asks, "Is it someone new?" The dialogue serves both as an in-game function—to further unsettle the player—and as a meta-narrative on the overall game itself. The player *is by very definition someone new to the fictive world of Rapture.* Even if the player has played the game before, each successive entry into the game's world serves to immerse the player but not always in the same manner. For example, a new player has no idea what is coming, and may well wonder if he or she will have to fight this female Splicer, and then considers what other horrors await in the game. The returning player already knows that he or she will be able to escape this predicament at its most dire moment and thus may instead focus on the atmosphere or seek details not apprehended during previous playthroughs. As Georgios Christou asserts, "Video game players must also allow for the same willing suspension of disbelief for the games they play, immersion becomes an emergent attribute created by the interaction of the player with a game" (n.p.). Not only does the player suspend disbelief, as readers and filmgoers must to find immersion in their respective stories, he or she must also "agree" to remain immersed throughout the game. Even for those players returning to a previously played digital narrative, immersion not only is possible but also can take on deeper resonance, as it might for a player making subsequent forays into Rapture. Astrid Esslin argues,

> Different playings of a game, conversely, tend to result in entirely different games, with outcomes as varied as winning or losing, gaining and/or losing lives, credits, and other countable units, radically different navigation options, and, as a result, a large

> diversity of experiences of the game world per se. We might say that the rules and structures of a game open up an almost infinite array of gameplay experiences, which are far more diverse phenomenologically than different readings of a standard (print) text—no matter how literary its intent [28].

While this proves true in some cases, perhaps especially so in open-world games, that should not be taken to imply that no "text" can exist for a game. In the case of *BioShock*, there are a set number of possible outcomes with regard to how many permutations the game offers the player narrative-wise. The idea of individual experiences proves fascinating, and also frustratingly ephemeral. Digital storytelling produces varied reactions in gamers in the same way that other storytelling forms do. The key difference lies in the permutations of experience. Films and novels, for example, are essentially static forms. They are not different upon subsequent viewings or readings, instead changing based on a viewer's or reader's perceptions of the materials at given times. Flagging attention may cause a missed detail, intense focus may unearth new avenues of interpretation. Yet the text is, essentially, always the same. The digital narrative always begins and ends focused on the player's agency as that story is approached, whether for the first time or after many playthroughs. Even in the absence of numerous permutations of story, the player still exists in an intimate relationship with the story and the choices related to traversing its environment, whether the differences are as significant as ones that can be changed in a choice-based narrative or as simple as opting to explore an area from right to left instead of from left to right. The narrative, while structurally the same, splinters into different experiences.

Immersion takes on added dimension in games such as those of the *Assassin's Creed* series as narrative becomes inherently twined with place. In these games, players use parkour—free running—as their primary means of navigating each particular game's setting.[3] While each individual title crafts a unique story, they share the chronicling of the centuries-old fight for dominance between the Assassins and the Templars. The Assassins privilege choice and free will and their critical importance to human development, even though such freedoms may also lead to atrocities and war. Their creed, "Nothing is true. Everything is permitted," gets at the core of this contradiction. Freedom comes with great price, as it allows for each person to encode on the world his or her own moral tendencies. Yet to live otherwise is to exist in bondage. The Templars would rather take away free will entirely and rule over the world's population as a totalitarian regime, using modern-day bread and circuses to keep the populace pacified and yielding. Each game, to greater and lesser degrees, functions as a frame narrative.[4] The modern frame finds the Assassins struggling in their fight against the Templars. The Templars, through Abstergo Industries, have created a device called an Animus, which allows a modern-day person to travel back into the memories of someone in

the past. The Templars' goal is to use this technology to eliminate the Assassins completely and to manipulate history in their favor.

The narrative within the narrative, and the one in which the player is more fully immersed, involves the Assassins trying to stop Abstergo by sending their own operatives into the past and into the memories of a now long-dead Assassin to stop the Templars and to strengthen their own fight in the modern day.[5] Against this backdrop, *Assassin's Creed 2*, *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*, and *Assassin's Creed: Revelations* all feature the player embodying two distinct protagonists: Desmond Miles in the modern day and his ancestor Ezio Auditore in Renaissance Florence. The three games, three parts of a vast narrative spanning dozens of hours of play, chronicle Ezio becoming an Assassin after his father and brothers are framed and executed by Templars, rising to strengthen and to lead a large portion of the Assassins Order, and then finally, at the close of the third game, dying as an old man. Simultaneously, the games chronicle Desmond as he grows from a petulant, even reluctant Assassin, to a leader within its scattered modern movement, to a hero who sacrifices his life to try to save humanity. That Ezio is one of Desmond's forbears cements the two pieces of the narrative together and centers the player within it.

While the complex narrative and the use of two protagonists in these games certainly creates a strong sense of immersion, the specific use of space and place proves unique and noteworthy. Marie-Laure Ryan states,

> The invisibility of the strategic design is due to the procedural, code-driven nature of games. As players venture into the landscapes of the game world, they don't know what code is attached to their various features. To adopt a pair of concepts made famous by Deleuze and Guattari (1987), the mimetic design deploys a smooth space to the eye of the player, while the strategic design creates a striated space that subordinates travel to the points to be reached and to the tasks to be performed in order to progress in the game [112].

This concept finds form in *Assassin's Creed* in that the level of detail and verisimilitude supersede a player's initial reaction to reject the in-game world as simulation only. Over the course of the trilogy, players travel to Renaissance Florence, Rome, and Masyaf, Syria, among other cities. The player traverses these areas, embodying Ezio from the third-person perspective, primarily through the use of parkour and by utilizing the physical buildings of each location to escape, explore, or maneuver into the best possible positions from which to carry out assassinations of various Templar targets. For example, the player may choose to move to higher ground by scaling a building to better assess a target area and formulate a plan to carry out a given assassination or to reach a destination. From a higher vantage point, the player can identify and mark guards and study their movement patterns without being spotted and forced into open combat. The games privilege stealth, and the unique

physicality of these games is exemplified through the relationship between the player and the physical setting.[6] Emily Bembeneck makes the insightful observation that "games then are (a) static structures of code that are represented differently in order to give an illusion of temporal movement, and (b) a medium that tells narrative often through spatial progression rather than temporal progression" (n.p.) that focuses on an especially unique feature of *Assassin's Creed.* Within the game, time passes, and when the player reaches certain milestone narrative points in the game, he or she will be notified by moving to a new setting how much time has passed—perhaps a year or more in some cases. However, because of the nature of the games, the entire series and not just the games featuring Ezio Auditore, as an open-world system, temporal markings matter less. Since the player has free reign to leave the main narrative in favor of completing side quests or simply exploring the entirety of the in-game world, he or she is free from strict time deadlines within which main narrative quests must be completed and exists in a curious relationship to passing time. Instead, returning to Bembeneck's ideas, players are much more likely to consider the narrative relative to where they are physically located on the map, rather than the year or time it is within the game. Where and what matter significantly more than when.

The *Assassin's Creed* series also makes use of a unique map-revealing feature, wherein the player finds specific "viewpoints" that are used to reveal his or her surroundings and further connect the player to a sense of spatial importance, immersing the player into the fictive world one section at a time rather than all at once. Viewpoints are scattered throughout the in-game map, and until the player reaches them, those portions of the map appear shrouded in fog.[7] Importantly, players must always use their parkour skills to access the viewpoints, which tend to be at the highest places within the landscape. To reach some of the viewpoints, the player must carefully consider the building itself and plan a course of action that will allow him or her to reach the top. One such viewpoint is found at the top of the Basilica di San Lorenzo, recreated in the game with startling accuracy. The player must first find a starting point at street level from which to begin the ascent; one such point of access is a doorway with a decorative overhang that allows Ezio to get a handhold and begin to climb. From there, the player has to negotiate the complex external architecture of the basilica, moving carefully upward past cupolas, ledges, window frames, and the like in a manner that often proves to be trial and error, as Ezio can fall off buildings if the player is not careful, or a player may try one avenue of ascent only to discover that it does not lead all the way to the top. Careful observation proves necessary at every stage to locate the next possible set of grips and handholds. For the Basilica di San Lorenzo, the player's goal lies at the top of the basilica's highest spire. As with all viewpoints, once the player reaches this one, he or she has the option to

"synchronize" the viewpoint. In a breathtaking animation that remains fairly consistent across all games in the series, the player's avatar, in this case Ezio, crouches atop the landmark as the camera pans out and all around him, lifting the fog below and revealing more of the city at hand. This immersive and tactile element extracts the physical setting of the game from being strictly background and immaterial, moves it into an integral part of the narrative, and makes it inherent to the player's sense of being immersed within the setting. Douglas Dow explores the use of Florence and its historical landmarks as the setting in *Assassin's Creed 2*, arguing, "These striking replicas are not simply scenography, however, for the player must navigate them to accomplish the objectives in the game. Indeed, the cityscape was designed to accommodate the free-running mechanics of the avatar, who jumps and climbs like an acrobat" (217). At its finest moments, the game series allows for a seamless integration of player, avatar, and city, a relationship constrained by time, yet not bound by it.

The interesting and final questions regarding the Ezio games lie in determining *how accurate this virtual Florence is* and then *how accurate must it be*, with both concepts folding back to the central notion of the player engaged with, immersed in, both narrative and landscape.[8] Myles McNutt considers the question of the overall narrative of the game, concluding,

> When considering the *Assassin's Creed* series in regards to mediating the past, its relationship to actual history—as in history as it happened—is limited. While heroes like Connor[9] or Ezio might intersect with famous historical figures like George Washington or Pope Alexander VI, or weave their way through a particular historical event, their exploits—science fictional as they are—remain distinct enough that any label other than historical fiction would be undeserved, even if the games' broader narratives stick largely to basic historical fact [n.p.].

McNutt goes on to quote Ubisoft's creative developer Patrice Désilets, who considers the importance of historical verisimilitude: "Patrice Désilets revealed, 'I like to say that histories are licensed. So, yes we can take some liberties, but not too much, otherwise … what's the point, right?'" (*Ibid.*). Although some might be tempted to condemn the game, then, as admittedly ahistorical and therefore not worthy of consideration as anything other than strictly fiction, such a view is limited and shortsighted. Certainly, the game's narrative takes liberties with literal history—a large conspiracy theory involving Nikola Tesla serves as only one example—and also with some of the landscape of Florence. While much of the game's rendering of the city proves startlingly accurate, for the purposes of creating the virtual Florence, the recreation does not exist on a one-to-one level. To that end, the game serves as a work of historical fiction. Adam Ruch states of the game's setting, "Whether historian or uninitiated, setting this game in Italy during the Renaissance will prime the gamer with whatever pre-existing understandings

they have of the time period and draw the player in more deeply" (285). The anchor the game presents to the real world—to the real Renaissance Florence—is not rendered with complete authenticity and never claims to be. Instead, it functions much as a work of historical fiction might, introducing the reader to glimpses into an era, place, or history with which he or she has various degrees of familiarity. From that starting point, not only does the player become immersed in the game, he or she may well take that in-game experience into the real world by engaging in additional research.

In moving now beyond the issue of strictly spatial setting and into the more complex issues of immersion and world building, *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* provides compelling examples of how the depth of its world adds not only to its sense of verisimilitude but also to the overall sense of immersion experienced by the player as he or she traverses this carefully built structure. In many ways, *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* functions as much on an aural level as it does on the written level. The game contains approximately 450,000 words of spoken dialogue, meaning that all dialogue, from critical narrative moments to the calls of shopkeepers, come to life via the spoken word, instead of existing merely as subtitles on the screen. Although having a game whose dialogue is almost wholly voiced is not a requirement for a powerful story, and indeed is no small feat for any game of this length and depth, its presence lends to a sense of a world inhabited by individuals, each with his or her own accent, intonation, and other characteristics. However, as impressive as the game's length is on its own, this reflects only a small portion of the world building that developer CD Projekt Red poured into the game. In addition to the voiced dialogue, the game includes lore contained in found objects, such as letters, books, journal entries, notes, and the like. In total, these written materials combined with the dialogue provide approximately 2,500 pages of text.[10]

An analysis of the different types of lore, both written and circumstantial, and events available in the game illustrates the manner in which an immersive world can be created. In the game, the character embodies the witcher Geralt of Rivia from a third-person perspective. Because all of the dialogue in the game is voiced, everyone he interacts with, from major characters critical to the narrative to shopkeepers, has a distinct personality and unique dialogue. Additionally, as Geralt traverses the in-game world, he comes upon events and people that are not critical to the game's main storyline, but whose existence deepens the player's sense of immersion. Michael Darnell explains these events in this way, "While pursuing his goals, Geralt may stumble across a war orphanage in the middle of a swamp or across a muddied battlefield on the outskirts of a town with fewer people than houses. What makes a lot of these little moments special is that they're usually not tied to any specific mission or quest. They just exist as part of the

world and they exist in ways that make sense" (n.p.). Darnell's final point here proves most apt. Indeed, the people who populate the world, who talk to Geralt or tell him of their plights or joys, form the backbone of the game. This allows the game's main plot points to function within a world that feels complete, from its varied citizens, to its political intrigues, to its beasts and monsters.

The game's bestiary[11] provides another location offering the player additional information and lore about the game's world. Although the entries themselves are too numerous to list here, the entry for a creature known as the Leshen is an example of how these entries function with the game's virtual world and then also provide, in the specific case of *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, correlations to real-world mythology. The bestiary entry for the Leshen reads as follows:

> Leshens dwell in dense, primeval woods. Fiercely territorial creatures, they hunt with stealth and cunning as their only companions. They use their inborn magic to control the plants and animals within their territory—and so, when stalking them, half the battle is merely getting near enough to strike. Leshens old enough to earn the appellation "ancient" wield advanced skills and tactics that make them particularly dangerous.

The entry follows the pattern of others in the game, wherein the player receives not only the background of the given creature but also hints for defeating it or cautions to keep in mind should the player encounter one in battle. In this particular case, the player receives critical information that the Leshen, due to its ability to manipulate plant life, can be hard to hit with Geralt's sword because of the difficulty in moving close enough to easily do so. In practice, the Leshen not only briefly dematerializes, but it can also cause branches to erupt from the ground, effectively knocking back Geralt and leaving him open to a counterattack in return. While the bestiary entry avoids offering a complete strategy to the player, it provides valuable knowledge and perhaps a plan of action. The Leshen, as with many of the mythological and magical creatures inhabiting the in-game world, has its origins in real-world mythology, in this case Slavic tradition. That creature, known as a Leshy, does not share one-to-one identical traits with the in-game version, but it does provide the player with a sense of how real-world mythologies can be reimagined and then adapted to fit within a digital narrative's immersive storyline. While real-world influences on their own do not create a sense of immersion, the particular use of adapted mythology in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* provides a sense of connection among the player, virtual world, and real world.

The game also provides character biographies and overall information about the various political factions and wars in the in-game world, both current and past. The character biographies stand out in that they develop the

individuals—both major and more minor characters—such that they feel integrated within the fictive world. An outstanding example of this character development involves the higher vampire Emiel Regis Rohellec Terzieff-Godefroy, known simply as Regis within the game. The higher vampires, in the in-game world, differ from the "traditional" vampire that a player likely has in mind in that they are unhindered by items such as crucifixes and are unaffected by sunlight. They are, instead, very much like human beings in their behavior and motivations. They do drink blood, and while they can become addicted to it, they do not require it to survive. Regis's association and friendship with Geralt begin in the second game of the series, and Regis reappears as a major character in the *Wild Hunt*'s final DLC *Blood and Wine*. His biography in the DLC reads as follows:

> Geralt chased Sir Milton's murderer with mad intensity. How this chase ended stands as clear witness to the fact Geralt was facing a highly dangerous foe: the killer led Geralt to an old warehouse, where it set a trap for him. A fight ensued, and at a crucial moment Geralt was saved by Regis, a higher vampire and old friend. Here I must explain that, years ago, Regis had joined Geralt's band of fellow travelers (of which I was a proud part) and set off with us in search of Ciri. Together we lived through many fascinating adventures and Regis proved himself a loyal friend, the kind you can trust with your life. Sadly, the expedition ended tragically for Regis. He was killed by Vilgefortz, who reduced him to nothing more than a wet stain.
>
> Hence the witcher's immense surprise at encountering his old friend—after all, he had seen Regis die with his own eyes. But the thing is, that was not Regis's "final" death, nor even his first. As a young man, Regis had been a bit of a free spirit and overindulged in the drinking of blood. This lifestyle led to him being butchered by angry villagers. Regenerating from that took him fifty years—or nearly no time at all, for an immortal. When he was back in full health, he kicked the habit of blood drinking for good.
>
> For years, we'd all thought he was gone forever. Yet there he was, standing in front of Geralt in that dockside warehouse.
>
> Regis explained he had regenerated and come to Toussaint to find Dettlaff, a friend.
>
> Such were the dramatic circumstances bringing Regis and Geralt together again in Beauclair. They did not have long to enjoy their reunion, however. They could hear others approaching and Regis, not wanting to risk an encounter with angry humans, agreed to meet back up with Geralt at the cemetery where he had made an altogether comfortable temporary home for himself.

The specific construction of Regis's biographical details warrants closer consideration. The entry itself is written by a third party, who frequently breaks the fourth wall to interject personal encounters and experiences within the text. This character turns out to be Dandelion, a young man who is a close friend of Geralt and frequently writes down the latter's exploits. As such, the game's transitional loading screens—places where the player must wait for 20 seconds or so while the next major area of the game loads—feature Dandelion

recounting the events of the game's main narrative as if he were writing them down from a point of reflection. So too does Dandelion often pen the information found in places such as biographies, especially of those people, such as Regis, with whom he has had contact and personally knows. The entry itself chronicles what happens to Regis during the events of the second game, distilled in such a way that the current player, who may or may not have previously played it, apprehends enough information about Regis to invest him with the importance he has had as a friend to Geralt over many years. Perhaps most importantly, due to Dandelion's specific rhetorical distance to the events he recounts, the entry sets the events of the story within a larger historical frame of actions that have occurred. Dandelion's narration asks the player to consider the future from which he writes, while also reflecting on the characters' often complex interpersonal relationships in the story's immediate present. The narrative, therefore, exists far beyond the strict boundaries of the story the player experiences in the DLC.

The final immersive element to be considered in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* is best exemplified within an early required quest, entitled "Family Matters," involving a character called the Bloody Baron. While this quest is required for the player to continue with the main storyline of the game, the specific characters in this quest—the Baron, his wife, and their daughter—are so steeped in sorrow and regret that the quest itself serves as not only a powerful narrative moment but also a deeply immersive one. Its dark tones and the often miserable and thankless decisions the player embodying Geralt must make at various points during the quest underscore at an early point that the world Geralt lives in is not only dark and dangerous, but perhaps too much like our own, filled with morally questionable people who ruin their lives with one foolish choice. The quest is fairly involved and features a number of interrelated events, but the focus here will be on the story related to the Baron and his family. Distilling the complex threads of the quest leads to the following series of events. The Baron, a drunkard, regularly beats his wife, Anna. He believes that one such beating caused her to miscarry, leading to her abandoning him and fleeing to an unknown location. In the aftermath, importantly, he buries the fetus in an unmarked grave. Geralt discovers that Anna, filled with revulsion for her husband, had sought the services of three dangerous witches, who had helped her to abort the fetus in exchange for her becoming their slave. Due to the chaos in the household, Anna along with the Baron's daughter Tamara fled the household. A further complication comes in the form of the fetus the Baron buried. It has transformed into a mythological creature called a botchling, a hideous fetus-like creature that results from a dead child's being unwanted. Botchlings are fueled by primal emotions, such as rage and hatred, and prey on pregnant women in revenge for what has happened to them.[12]

As the quest continues, the player embodying Geralt has to make several decisions about the Baron and his family, none of which lead to a happy ending.[13] Those decisions directly concerning the botchling prove most important here. The player has two choices regarding the botchling: kill it or attempt a ritual that will soothe the botchling and transform it into a lubberkin, a guardian spirit that will watch over the Baron's home. The most immersive aspect of the quest arguably happens if the player opts to attempt the transformation ritual. To do this, the Baron must essentially apologize and atone for having abandoned the fetus to an unmarked grave. He has to give it a name and welcome it into his life. The ritual itself—with the Baron holding onto the monstrous fetus and genuinely expressing regret for what he has done—proves emotionally compelling, and the botchling is transformed into a lubberkin. However, after that, all does not necessarily end well. Depending on the choices the player makes regarding other aspects of the quest, including Anna's storyline, the final fates of these characters remain mired in tragedy. The immersive element to the quest lies in its ability to firmly root the player in a specific place and within specific events. The characters themselves are crafted so that they transcend being cartoonish or tropes. Instead, Anna and the Baron are two deeply flawed people in a violent and dysfunctional marriage whose mistakes continue to mount until the tragedy leading to the creation of the botchling.[14] The "Bloody Baron" quest is also an early introduction to the player that the world of *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* is vast and that interactions with one character may have unintended consequences in the life of another.

While immersion may usually be expected to take the form of events directly related to narrative, as in the case of *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, some games utilize gameplay mechanics themselves as an intriguing conduit to player immersion. The *Dark Souls* series of games, consisting of *Demon Souls* and *Dark Souls I–III*, and also *Bloodborne*, created by FromSoftware all have the same overarching approach to immersion: they utilize item descriptions as a unique method of introducing the player to the game's world.[15] The player is thrown into a world that feels inscrutable. There seems, at first, to be no real sense of destination or end goal, a common framing device in many narrative-driven video games. Instead, in these games, the player quickly becomes trapped and has to find an escape route. This also usually entails the player being thrown almost immediately into combat, in an underpowered, under-leveled state, an unforgiving introduction to each game's specific mechanics. Frans Mayra explores the difference between players who may focus on strategy—on finding ways to most exploit and succeed within a given game's mechanical parameters—and those who focus on story: "gamist is a term of RPG[16] lexicon, referring to the player attitude and style of action which focuses on game challenges and the optimal strategies on how to overcome

them. This is opposed with the 'dramatist' (or 'narrativist')" (82). In much the same way as video game studies should be seeking the throughways connecting ludology and narratology, so too should they focus on the intersection of gameplay strategies and player preferences with story. This particular series of games, all sharing the same overarching philosophy toward difficult mechanics, exemplifies the need to consider ludology and narratology together. The starting sequence of *Bloodborne* serves as an example. The player, who embodies a customizable male or female character, plays the game from the third-person perspective. He or she begins the game, *in medias res*, in some sort of medical clinic and is immediately asked to finalize a "contract" before the medical procedure can begin. Why any of this is happening and what may actually be wrong with the player's avatar are not disclosed. The avatar passes out from whatever is being done to him or her. Upon awakening, the avatar is nearly killed by a mutilated, bloodied, werewolf-type creature and then cornered by a number of smaller, malformed, white humanoids, whereupon he or she passes out again. Upon regaining consciousness this time, the avatar finds that the clinic has been abandoned, save for another werewolf-type creature guarding the way out of the lower level. The player cannot avoid combat with the beast and also cannot win, thus underscoring from the start the game's emphasis on failure. Instead, the player must engage the monster, whereupon he or she is killed only to reawaken/reanimate in a liminal space known as the Hunter's Dream. This opening sequence takes perhaps 10 minutes, moves at a feverish pace, and offers the player no context or reason for any of the events.

Certainly, much about the respective worlds of these five games proves immersive from the start, largely due to the immediate peril into which the player is cast. There is no time to acclimate to the environment or to understand the more complex gameplay mechanics prior to the player's having to figure out these elements, as he or she goes, and usually with a fierce adversary to defeat. It is not much beyond this opening series of events that the player must encounter, and find a way to overcome, the game's first boss, the Cleric Beast, in a frenzied and chaotic battle. The detailing of the worlds in the FromSoftware games—haunted and eerily beautiful landscapes—also seeks to draw the player into the overall setting. However, these elements do not, in and of themselves, serve as narratives any more than the harried combat elements do. Rather than provide players with an unfolding story within the context of the game proper, meaning those events in which the player is directly involved, these games instead reveal plot, but never all of it, through the descriptions found for in-game items. As a point of comparison, this chapter previously discussed the use of character descriptions and a bestiary to add dimension and depth to the in-game world in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, whereas in the *Dark Souls* series and *Bloodborne*, item descriptions all

but serve *as the plot* of the game. Thus, the details of the game's story are revealed in very brief intervals, because the item descriptions are concise, and out of any sense of order. One such item in *Bloodborne*, an umbilical cord that is separated into pieces, serves as an example as it provides cryptic hints to the player both about a lineage of powerful creatures and the possible use of the items themselves.[17] The four cord pieces all begin with the same initial description:

> A great relic, also known as the Cord of the Eye. Every infant Great One has this precursor to the umbilical cord.

Three pieces share this wording:

> Use to gain Insight and, so they say, eyes on the inside, although no one remembers what that truly entails.

The remaining language is specific to each of the pieces:

> Every Great One loses its child, and then yearns for a surrogate. The Third Umbilical Cord precipitated the encounter with the pale moon, which beckoned the hunters and conceived the Hunter's Dream.
>
> Provost Willem sought the Cord in order to elevate his being and thoughts to those of a Great One, by lining his brain with eyes. The only choice, he knew, if man were to ever match Their greatness.
>
> Every Great One loses its child, and then yearns for a surrogate. This Cord granted Mensis audience with Mergo, but resulted in the stillbirth of their brains.

Even when taken in their totality, the descriptions only provide a *sense* of a larger story, skirting its boundaries while providing tantalizing, perhaps even frustrating, glimpses into a larger mythology that is never completely revealed to the player. The items themselves allow the player to fight one final boss, called the Moon Presence, which appears to be the "Great One" referenced in the item descriptions. However, from the specific wording of the descriptions, or perhaps the deliberate lack of specificity, there appear to be any number of Great Ones. The text, in rather tongue-in-cheek fashion, goes so far as to admit that no one really remembers anyway. Whether they are all of the same type, as in iterations of the Moon Presence, or whether they are all unique and powerful creatures bound under the same overall title of Great Ones remains unanswered.

A second example of an item description serving as the plot of the game focuses on the item called the Soul of the Rotten, obtained when the player defeats the boss The Rotten in *Dark Souls II*. The Rotten is a nightmarish creature composed of many corpses sewn together into one hideous form. As is the case with other bosses in these games, the player comes upon it without any real context of what it is or how it came to exist. The player's only signal that he or she is about to encounter an area boss is that mist bars

the way to the creature's lair. The player has to specifically opt to move through the mist, thus allowing for preparation time. After the player defeats The Rotten, he or she obtains its Soul and finally gains some sense of larger context as to its existence from the description on this item.[18] It reads:

> Soul of the Rotten, who writhes deep within the Gutter.
> The Rotten embraces all, in the sanctuary for all things unwanted or tossed away.
> Use the special soul of the Rotten to acquire numerous souls, or to create something of great worth.

The description's objectives are twofold, one internal to the game's own lore and one external as a direct form of communication with the player. Certainly, the addition to the game's lore proves ephemeral, as only the briefest glimpse into this creature's purposes is given. However, the description speaks to a sense of balance within the world, in the form of a creature whose function is to serve as a beacon to the discarded. It also provides the player with an important clue to the two possible uses of the item. The player may opt to harvest the item to gain the immediate advantage of more Souls, which function as the game's currency of sorts, or to hold onto it, with the clue that it may serve a greater purpose later on, should the player prove patient and observant for other fragmented pieces of narrative.

The particular form of storytelling found in these games by FromSoftware may not appeal to gamers desiring to be specifically immersed within a more traditional narrative. However, the precise and controlled manner by which information about each respective game's world unfolds encourages the player to become invested in seeking out as many items as possible, so as to fill in as much of the story as possible. Franziska Ascher explores the use of item description as a narrative tool, stating, "To understand an entity in *Dark Souls* often means to kill it," and "although the narrative aspect is rather minor compared to the gameplay, these two components closely correspond based on the fact that both are equally challenging and must be deduced by the players themselves" (n.p.). Although she speaks here specifically of the first *Dark Souls* game, her ideas apply broadly to all five games mentioned in this section. To gain any sense of context or information about the world, the player must constantly kill, because numerous items are obtained from killing various monsters, including bosses. Ironically, to kill these creatures, especially those such as The Rotten that appear to be singularly unique, albeit beastly, means to remove them from the literal world of the narrative, only to have them endure in written form as the descriptions of who or what they had been. This particular format—encouraging the player to explore and kill broadly—allows for an immersion into these storylines that might not otherwise exist, or exist as strongly. These games focus on extremely difficult combat above all other considerations, often requiring

the player to replay areas countless times before he or she successfully moves on. Such a formula can certainly become tiresome, even irritating. Yet the reward of more information—of one more clue the player may use to piece together his or her own circumstances—can serve as powerful motivation. The narrative itself becomes the reward, not the scaffold.

Immersion, as it relates to the in-game world and a sense of space and place, can also be created via objects found within the game, analogous but not identical to, the use of objects in games such as the *Dark Souls* series. *BioShock*, *BioShock 2*, and *BioShock Infinite* all utilize audio recordings—placed as objects to be found throughout the game—to provide background information and a sense of place. Jessica Aldred and Brian Greenspan argue, "The act of gathering and playing these recordings becomes an integral part of the game story and experience, being thereby transformed from a nondiegetic into a diegetic act" (489). Their thoughts underscore the importance of the environment not only to the narrative itself but also to the player's sense of immersion within the fictive world. In the three *BioShock* titles, these audio recordings fill in peripheral details about the in-game world, the history and fall of Rapture in the first two titles, and that of Columbia in the last, and also provide information that may transform the player's initial perceptions about the games' stories. James Paul Gee provides a great way to consider digital narrative that can be readily applied to the idea of immersion and found objects, although his ideas also have merit when applied to the overall analysis of a digital narrative. He posits that players must go through a four-step process as they play a game. First,

> the player must *probe* the virtual world (which involves looking around the current environment, clicking on something, or engaging in certain action). Then, based on reflection while probing and then afterward, the player must form an *hypothesis* about what something (a text, object, artifact, event, or action) might mean in a usefully situated way. The player *reprobes* the world with that hypothesis in mind, seeing what effect he or she gets the player treats this effect as feedback from the world and accepts or *rethinks* his or her original hypothesis [90].

His particular attention to the constant interaction between digital narrative and player speaks to the complex nature of this relationship.

A few examples of the audio recordings in the *BioShock* series exemplify the need for the player to then go back and "reprobe" the narrative so as to further illuminate it. The first *BioShock* game introduces the character Brigid Tenenbaum, whose unfettered scientific research led to the creation of the Little Sisters, girls, many of them kidnapped, who are genetically altered and later tasked with collecting ADAM from the corpses littering Rapture.[19] When the player encounters Tenenbaum early in the game, she is contrite and regrets having done this to the children. She provides the player with a means to "save" the Little Sisters from their fate as mindless collectors of ADAM.[20] She

cares for all of these girls, now orphaned and trapped in Rapture with her, and vows that protecting them is her primary goal. While the player may find it admirable that she has acknowledged her deed as evil, that consideration of Tenenbaum deepens when the player explores Rapture and finds audio diaries—created by or about Tenenbaum—that fill in her backstory. Tenenbaum is revealed, via these diaries, to have survived the Holocaust. She had been taken to Auschwitz at 16 years of age, but because of her prodigious scientific knowledge and her lack of moral qualms about helping her captors, she has survived. The rest of her family died in the concentration camp. One of her diary entries recalling her experiences reads as follows:

> I was at German prison camp only of 16 years old when I realize I have love for science. German doctor, he make experiment. Sometime, he make scientific error. I tell him of this error, and this make him angry. But then he asks, "How can a child know such a thing?" I tell him, "Sometimes, I just know." He screams at me, "Then why tell me?" "Well," I said, "if you're going to do such things, at least you should do them properly."[21]

Tenenbaum's story is thus revealed to be far more morally complicated. One could argue that Tenenbaum did what she needed to do to survive the Holocaust and is not morally culpable for having chosen to help her captors in order to live. Her intellect allowed her an inroad to interactions with high-level Nazi scientists, and thus to survival, and she took full advantage of this. However, her actions in Rapture prove far more psychologically complex when measured against elements of her biography. After seeing the horrors of Auschwitz, and having initially been a prisoner herself, Tenenbaum still opts to perpetuate atrocity on the bodies of others, specifically defenseless girls. As the player learns of these details later in the game, he or she must then reconsider any previous conceptions about Tenenbaum and her motivations. The game's narrative leaves strict interpretation of Tenenbaum fairly murky. She seems to be driven by a combination of guilt and, in her words, "maternal instinct." Yet whether she feels a deeper sense of remorse or whether she simply regrets the overall outcome of both her research and of Rapture, proves ephemeral and is left to the player's interpretation.

BioShock Infinite also relies on audio diaries, called Voxophones in this game, to provide ancillary and immersive details about both major and minor characters. One character making recordings is Daisy Fitzroy, who is at first an ally but then an antagonist to the player embodying the game's protagonist Booker DeWitt. The player initially knows only that Daisy Fitzroy is the leader of the rebel group the Vox Populi and that their goal is to overthrow Prophet Comstock and his oppressive, totalitarian rule over Columbia. Since it becomes clear very early that Prophet Comstock is a morally bankrupt person, the player's own initial sympathies may well lie with Fitzroy and her rebellion. Indeed, the player learns that Comstock had framed Fitzroy, a black

woman, for the murder of his wife to cover up that he himself had had her killed. Given the deeply ingrained racism in Columbia, it is easy for Comstock to pin the blame on a racial outsider. The player can find a number of Voxophones, recorded in Daisy's voice, detailing her reactions to this betrayal. She had been a house slave in the Comstock household and initially thought that her situation was as ideal as it was ever going be given the circumstances. She says:

> Days at Comstock House was simple. Hard work, sure—but simple. Wringin' the linens, scrubbing the floors…. Hmph, Lady Comstock, she even had a kind word, now and then. Almost enough to make me think I had a place in their world. God made foolish girls so He could have something to play with.

Later Voxophones recount her desperate attempts to hide from authorities and reveal her as a sympathetic woman with a just cause. This backstory proves to be a powerful narrative against which the player can measure the woman Fitzroy becomes once the player meets her. In the later part of the digital narrative, which finds Daisy successful in conquering Columbia, she loses her moral high ground. She becomes the type of person she had at first claimed to hate: a dictatorial leader willing to kill without mercy. Without the player's discovering the Voxophones, Daisy's story would feel superficial. The background information the player gleans allows her story to resonate deeply.

The types of auxiliary information provided via audio recordings in *BioShock* and *BioShock Infinite*, focused on character background and development, belongs to one category of ancillary narrative details contributing to an overall sense of player immersion, but the iterations of background information take on other forms as well. *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* also utilizes audio recordings in the form of cassette tapes to add further immersive depth to a sprawling main narrative. Some of these tapes are automatically obtained when the player completes main story missions. Others have to be found and are oftentimes hidden in enemy-laden areas. The tapes can be placed into several overarching categories: there are music cassettes,[22] tapes containing vast amounts of both historical and ahistorical details about the history of Afghanistan and Soviet actions there during the 1980s, cassettes containing extra details about major characters, and taped conversations between characters that might be funny, tragic, or compelling but are otherwise unrelated to the game's main narrative. The game's interface contains an inventory of the tapes collected, meaning that the player has to opt to listen to them after they are collected. An example of this last category provides the game with a moment of humor and also helps to humanize one of the game's major characters, Kazuhira Miller. Miller has to be rescued by the player, who embodies Punished Venom Snake, the leader of a private army called Diamond Dogs,[23] after Miller is captured by the Soviets in Afghanistan.

Miller has suffered torture, and in the battle that led to his capture, lost his right arm and left leg. As a result of what he endures, Miller can often be quick to anger and very rarely appears to be relaxed, even with friends like Snake. He also grows increasingly paranoid as the game unfolds. The player uncovers, through the completion of missions, a series of tapes titled "The Hamburgers of Kazuhira Miller." In total, they span about 12 minutes of recorded audio. In them, the player learns of Miller's quest to create the perfect hamburger. He tests out his creations on Code Talker, an old Dine (Navajo) man who had been rescued by the Diamond Dogs. In the first recordings, Code Talker rejects every hamburger Miller makes for him, stating that they are good, but fail to remind him of the hamburgers he had enjoyed as a child. The final tape finds Miller successful, with Code Talker nearly at a loss for words as he eats the hamburger that brings back "the taste of my youth." Although Miller had started with only the finest ingredients, he discovers that the type of hamburger people really like and are nostalgic for is the fast food burger, which he recreates through some dubious "science" that produces an oddly colored, but delicious, final product. Miller is especially proud of how cheap the burger is to make and that it seems to require no refrigeration while lasting indefinitely and muses that he may have solved world hunger, leading to what he envisions as a "Pax Hamburgana." Certainly, the conversation in these tapes is absurd, as well as hilarious. However, its overall function is important. It allows the player insight into a different aspect of Miller's personality, to see him interested in something other than revenge, and to remind the player that Miller was likely a very different person prior to suffering his injuries

The objects detailed in the preceding video games function as tools for immersion, even though they also function as inherent parts of the digital story. While some of these objects are easily found during the course of the game, many require the player to spend time fully exploring each environment or risk missing them. While the examples related here focus on audio recordings, these specific inroads to immersion represent only one form such objects may take. Letters, journals, overheard conversations that only trigger when the player happens upon them, and the like also function to provide ancillary, yet richly detailed, information that adds to the digital narrative proper. As such, they function as an immersive element, inviting the player to spend time simply existing in the digital story world. As has been stated and will be reiterated throughout this book, digital storytelling requires player investment. The level of player immersion in the story is a matter of choice, as a player cannot be compelled to fully investigate the in-game world, but failing to do so defeats the purpose of exploring a digital story.

A final angle on immersion focuses on the consideration of the relationship between player and avatar. Zach Waggoner asks, "Who are we when we're

also someone else in virtual play and space?" (5) in relation to massively multiplayer online games, wherein gamers have the ability to create an often detailed and highly customized avatar. However, the relationship between self and digital self is an inherent feature of video games and therefore of digital storytelling. The player may not always be placed in the situation of creating an avatar completely from scratch such that minute details fall under the purview of player choice. In some games, the player embodies a character with one preset point of view, as is the case of the player embodying Booker DeWitt while playing *BioShock Infinite*. The third and fourth chapters of this book will discuss how different characters function within their given storylines from a narrative perspective, so it is useful here to consider the idea of player and character as it relates to the interaction between player and game. Martti Lahti suggests that "one of the characteristics of video games throughout their history has been an attempt, with the help of various technologies, to erase the boundary separating the player from the game world and to play up the tactile involvement" (159), which eloquently expresses that in many games the player becomes invested in characters differently than he or she may for characters in literature or even film. The reason centers on the player's moving from spectator to active participant in the story, for even in the active act of reading, the player is still once removed from the text, while the act of watching a film sets up an even greater divide. James Paul Gee describes this idea of the gamer becoming immersed in, or identifying with, his or her character in this way: "projective identity" can create a space wherein one can "transcend both [the character's limitations] and [one's own]" (56). The complexity expressed by Gee circles back to the idea that video games create a type of feedback loop—input and output—between player and digital text. As the player becomes more skilled with a game's mechanics, his or her avatar becomes more competent, stronger, and more skilled. In return, the player performs feats that are impossible in the real world—using parkour, for example, to scale historical landmarks all over the globe. Kurt Squire contends, "Through recursive cycles of perceiving and acting, thinking and doing within the game system, a player begins to adopt a particular perceptivity of an avatar within the game world; the player becomes a hybrid version of himself or herself" ("Content to Context" 22). Although he addresses the embodiment of an avatar by a player specifically in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, his ideas apply broadly to the concept of bleed through between player perspective and embodied character such that each becomes shaped by the other. However, while discussions about player avatars and immersion tend to focus on those instances in which the player has more choice over shaping the avatar, less attention has been paid to how a player becomes immersed in—and identifies with—a pre-created character. This relationship, despite the player embodying a character created by the

game's developers, can prove no less intense as the player becomes more invested in the digital story. Because of the participatory nature of the digital story, the player's sense of personal distant between character and self proves much more permeable.

An interesting branch to consider regarding character and play lies in games that use an unreliable narrator as both a major feature of the story and the character embodied by the player. In this case, it is helpful to keep separate the narrative in which such a character appears and the traits of that particular character so as to focus specifically on the interaction between player and character and how this provides for a particular type of immersion. Certainly, many stories—no matter the medium—utilize an unreliable narrator to keep vital information from the person experiencing the story until the point of revelation and/or to keep that person from knowing, for certain, to what extent the narrator might reasonably be believed. In many of these instances, the unreliable narrator is an adult or, at the very least, a character old enough to deliberately deceive or withhold vital information needed for a full understanding of the circumstances to be possible. However, a less common choice includes narrators such as Benjy Compson from *The Sound and the Fury*, whose intellectual disability drastically affects how he perceives his world and how he is able to express his portion of the story to the reader. In his case, any events that are unclear or have the appearance of not being wholly truthful are not due to explicit intent, but to a lack of the ability of expression. The video game *Among the Sleep* places the player in the first-person perspective embodying a two-year-old male toddler, who otherwise remains unnamed, and in so doing, throws the player into a situation in which the toddler's age itself nightmarishly distorts the events around him as the story becomes centered on the player unraveling the mystery of what terrifies the child.

What proves unique with *Among the Sleep* lies in the distance created between the player and the character he or she embodies, as the player is forced to perceive all of the in-game world through the eyes of a toddler. The game creates a powerful sense of immersion, though, by tossing the player into a literal nightmare, with few clues as to why the child is so tormented. Although most two-year-old children possess some language skills, the game developers opt to keep the toddler silent, placing the only dialogue with characters external to the one embodied by the player, as in the case of the toddler's mother. In addition, because a toddler of that age in real life would not be able to read, anything in the game that has text on it is presented as gibberish, so the player cannot read it. The player also struggles, given the toddler's size, to perform basic tasks, such as opening doors and moving with any degree of accuracy or speed. The toddler can walk or crawl, at the player's discretion, but he is quicker and steadier crawling. The effect is at once discon-

certing, off-putting, and immersive, as the player becomes further invested in the toddler's story and is compelled to see the world through those eyes.

The game begins with little context as to what is going on or why. The boy is with his mother, celebrating his second birthday, when a knock on the door takes her out of view. The player hears, although the words are not always distinct, as the toddler may not understand or recognize them, the mother fighting with whomever is at the door. Something about her demeanor and tone—the player could only be speculating in the opening minutes of the game—feels off. She is too cheery, too attentive. The situation quickly grows stranger when she brings the child back to the nursery, places him in a playpen, and leaves the child the player embodies completely unattended. After some time, the player escapes the playpen and finds a stuffed teddy bear, Teddy, who animates and serves as the child's protector and guide. The pair make their way into a large wardrobe, cavernous and dark to the toddler, and Teddy ominously notes, "Something's coming." Teddy consistently acts as the means by which the toddler is able to put more complex fears or ideas into words, and here, Teddy's words signal the mother finally returning, finding the player in the closet, and noting how the toddler needs to "stop hiding" from her. Teddy, while ultimately a friend and protector of the child, has a bit of an air of menace around him as well, as the player cannot initially determine if Teddy is protecting the child from danger or bringing danger to him. This ambiguity folds into the overarching idea that this toddler is not safe and is not able to even reliably depend on his own mother for safety, as she can turn on him at any moment.

As the narrative continues to unfold, the child awakens into what seems to be a nightmare world where he must hide from a hag-like monster who seems to want to do him lethal harm. As the player continues through the world, the source of the child's fears comes into sharp focus. Bottles of alcohol litter the environment, pictures drawn by the toddler depict crying faces and sadness, and in one particularly affecting sequence, a normal-looking woman, the mother's avatar, drinks from a well and stumbles away from it, having transformed into a hag, presumably the same one he encounters earlier in the game. Clearly, the child's mother suffers from both alcoholism and deep depression, as evidenced by the closing sequence of the game. The toddler finally finds his mother in the kitchen of their home nearly passed out on the floor. She lashes out at the toddler, then crumbles, sobbing, "I'm sorry. I never meant to. It's too much." The toddler is ultimately "rescued" by someone coming to the home, presumably his father, but the emotional trauma of what has happened will surely linger. Philip Kollar notes of the game's overall setting, "The things that actually hurt—the true source of the toddler's nightmares—are all the darker for their lack of physicality. The main character is haunted by problems much greater than monsters, and there are no easy

fixes" (n.p.). Herein lies the means by which the character—the toddler—serves as an immersive element to the game, one separate but intertwined with the narrative of the game itself. The player, by virtue of the distance created by embodying a toddler, finds himself or herself in the role of feeling protective of the toddler and saddened for him, yet at the same time needing to place him into danger to unravel the story.

A second element—the honesty with which the game attempts to take a toddler's perception of a mother's alcoholism and convert it into a symbolic world through which the player must transverse—also allows for the player to move beyond the strangeness of embodying a toddler. Kenneth Sher presents the results of studies examining the effect of parental alcoholism on children and observes, "Researchers have identified two broad classes of psychopathological symptoms in childhood: internalizing and externalizing symptoms. Internalizing psychopathology encompasses symptoms such as anxiety and depression," with the second class describing external behaviors such as rage or otherwise acting out (249). The toddler in *Among the Sleep* primarily exhibits behavior of the first category, but also some of the second. Because the player embodying the toddler must hide under furniture and remain still whenever the hag is near—as there is no means for combat or defense in the game—the overwhelming fear and anxiety with which the child has lived for likely all of his life comes sharply into relief. While the toddler does not directly act out, he clearly expresses confusion over why his mother sometimes becomes a monster, and he goes as far as attempting to hide from her.

Identification with a character or characters within a digital story can lead to a scenario wherein the player imaginatively projects himself or herself more fully into the digital story, as can certainly be the case with any of the digital narratives described in this book. Similar to providing a structure in which immersion occurs as the player embodies an unexpected avatar, so too can immersion be created by connecting the player to characters who exist as antagonists within a game. Lisa Cron notes of the importance of emotionally complex antagonists, "No one is bad to the bone, psychopaths not withstanding" (135). *Danganronpa Another Episode: Ultra Despair Girls* exemplifies the concept of antagonists who end up working in opposition to the protagonist—and this case, committing atrocity—but not without reason.[24] Within the twisted world of the game's narrative, the player, who embodies a teenager named Komaru Naegi, must fight her way through a city filled with both murderous robots and brainwashed children. The ringleaders of all the chaos are children themselves, the self-described Warriors of Hope, who want to kill all adults and create a "paradise" just for children. The Warriors of Hope range a bit in age, but none appears to be older than early teens. The reasons behind their endeavor add a complicated layer of tragedy to the

game, one that elevates the antagonists above being strictly adversaries to be defeated by the player. Each of the Warriors of Hope comes from some sort of abusive or horrific background, which is revealed to the player either directly or via story sequences the player views from a third-person perspective without being an active participant.

Two of the Warriors and their actions within the game serve as examples here of how past trauma informs their current choices. The first, Masaru Daimon, has suffered persistent and unspeakable physical abuse at the hands of his father. However, the young Masaru grew up terrified that if he reacted negatively to his father's abuse, his father would cease loving him. Thus, he relates how he always smiled during the beatings, so his father wouldn't leave him. When the player embodying Komaru confronts Masaru, he becomes agitated and seems to dissociate from himself during parts of the battle. During those times, he curses his own perceived weakness by reiterating, "Heroes aren't afraid," and turns on himself—violently beating his own arm—because he is afraid to face Komaru. Komaru expresses her horror and begs Masaru not to hurt himself, placing the embodied player in the position of at once sympathizing with and having to defeat Masaru, who himself only ever wanted to be a hero who could protect other children from harm. Kotoko Usugi serves as the second, and perhaps even more tragic, example. Her physical appearance is always very polished and cute—she has long pink hair, wears pink and white tights, and professes to love anything she deems "adorbs" (adorable). However, this superficial fascination with all that is cute and stereotypically feminine belies her identity as a survivor of rape. When Kotoko was young, her parents permitted media producers and directors to rape her to further her career as an actress, such was the power of the dollar signs in their eyes. Kotoko breaks down in the game any time someone mentions being "gentle" with her. Similar to Masaru, Kotoko disassociates at that point and relives the horrors of being raped, as she indicates that her rapists had promised they would be "gentle" with her. The game manages to flesh out the antagonists and make them sympathetic without exploiting their stories of abuse, violence, and fear. They have decided to become Warriors of Hope out of the belief, however misguided, that a world without adults would equate to safety for all children. The player has no choice but to defeat each of the Warriors of Hope—they are defeated, not killed—but carries an extra sense of the weight of those battles, given that his or her adversaries are deeply broken children. Immersion in these examples may be best thought of as peripheral—the player is drawn further into characters that are provided with more complex motivations for their own actions.

All these different iterations of immersion and the means by which it may be generated create a sense of *how* this may be achieved, but the larger, more ephemeral question of what that may mean for each individual player

proves more elusive. Indeed, some video game studies assert too much effort into the precise categorization of player experience, but in so doing, the nuance of experiencing storytelling in the digital format ends up lost. Frans Mayra argues, "An immersed player can be engaged with the game for hours on end, and yet it is hard to tell precisely what the actual meaning of game is for this player" (14). With literature, there are frequently instances wherein the same book strikes two different readers in two entirely different ways. One reader may connect to one character, another to a different one, and this is the nature of being an engaged reader. Life experiences inform how a reader engages with or becomes immersed in a text, and such is the case with digital storytelling. No one theory or method exists for determining an individual player's level of immersion or relationship to a given game, and there should not be. Even the examples given in this chapter reflect a narrow range of games, necessarily, and speak more to *categories* of experience than to providing a strict set of rules by which immersion may be gauged. The experience of a story—no matter its form—always exists on a deeply personal level. Chapters three and four build on the concepts of immersion and world building considered here by presenting more complex and in-depth analyses of several video games.

3

The Primacy of Story Part 1
Long-Form Storytelling in Digital Narratives

Modern gaming has evolved far from its eight-bit origins.[1] In their infancy, video games offered only the barest of options in terms of gameplay and story, and many, such as *Donkey Kong* or *Pac-Man*, functioned as either platform puzzle games or arcade-style video games. As technology has continued to evolve for the engines driving gameplay and the 3-D rendering tools available to artists to bring games to life, storytelling has kept pace, and gaming emerges now as a vibrant source of powerful, in-depth, and complex storytelling. Importantly, this does not stand as an assertion either that modern-day gaming consists *only* of games seeking to use the digital form to tell engaging narratives or that games *must* tell engaging stories. However, the depth and importance of video game stories continue to push the envelope as significant cultural artifacts exploring relevant, even painful issues, indicating that these stories warrant considered and thoughtful focus. A starting point lies in exploring the relationship between the gamer as an embodied subject, his or her own engagement with the game's story, and the story itself as it has been designed by the game's developers. Imagination is indeed a component of all other storytelling forms, as the readers of literature or viewers of film also elaborate on these forms of stories using their own imaginations. In the case of film, the visual elements are certainly filled in. However, the viewer still has the power of his or her own imagination through which the film's events are interpreted. It is useful to consider Jonathan Gottschall's thoughts on the interaction between the text and reader/player: "A writer lays down words, but they are inert. They need a catalyst to come to life. The catalyst is the reader's imagination" (6). In the context of gaming, the catalyst is the player's imagination. All interpretation of storytelling, regardless of form, often relies on external analyses to fill in gaps—whether intentional or not—in the narrative. In addition, a person who has fallen in love with any story, be it in print, film, video game, or the like, may imaginatively extrapolate

beyond that initial story to continue focusing on the characters, the world they inhabit, or both. For instance, fan fiction, fan-written stories taking place within any number of literary, filmic, or video game worlds, serves as an example of that use of imagination. It may be more important, then, to consider what is unique about the interpretation of digital storytelling or the form or the different responses of a player embodied within the game. Claude Bremond defines narratives in an elegant manner, stating that they contain "events of human interest" (63), and this lies at the heart of the exploration of digital storytelling. These are stories attracting the attention and the focus—across dozens and dozens of hours and across numerous titles within a series—of millions of gamers. These are stories producing the same effect as those in the very best of literature: they can reduce players to tears or incite anger, surprise, terror, or astonishment. They are a part of our collective need to tell and experience stories. This chapter focuses specifically on what are called "long-form" games in this book. The designation is one that utilizes gameplay completion time as a means of categorization. Specifically, "long-form games" denotes those that require at least 40 hours to complete. Although the designation is somewhat arbitrary, its purpose is to establish a demarcation between shorter and longer stories, in much the same way that literature is categorized into the short story and the novel. This designation implies no inherent degree of value, with longer or shorter lengths considered neither more nor less essential to the study of digital storytelling, but rather it denotes scale. The long-form digital story explores narrative threads on a broad and vast scale, and the examples presented for consideration in this chapter serve as especially powerful illustrations of this form.

Before moving into a fuller and more involved analysis of the structural, thematic, and symbolic storytelling components across a number of different long-form game titles, consideration should be given first to the changing gaming landscape such that the presence of gamers who are interested in story-based games has created intolerance for a lack of immersion and narrative depth. This discussion frames the analysis and consideration of not only the long-form titles in this chapter but also the short-form titles considered in the following chapter. As Eric Riddle argues, "many modern games are opting for narrative-heavy games with complex story arcs and multiple narrative threads woven together" (58), and, as such, a game that is marketed as story-based but proves to be something altogether different potentially raises gamers' ire. A recent case in point is the relative failure of *The Order: 1886* (2015). It sold moderately well, such that a sequel has not been ruled out, but it has not fared well with a lot of critics and gamers. The game is, simply, gorgeous, short, and boring.[2] Given a generous estimation of maximum playtime of only eight hours, the game fails to fully develop its narrative ambitions, and although the game was admittedly never marketed as a long-

form title, the developers were reluctant to admit, prior to initial reviews being posted to the Internet, just how short the game is.[3] On the surface, the game suffers from a plot that is clichéd at best, relying heavily on werewolves, vampires, and immortality as well as aspects of the legend of Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table and England's colonial endeavors. Yet these overarching tropes repeatedly find new forms, and not all of them fail to be compelling however retread the starting material. If the level of immersion had been higher or the characters engaging enough for the players to invest in their stories, the clichéd elements of plot may have been more forgivable. The game essentially consists of an initially interesting but ultimately unexplored plot set in an alternative history of steampunk London. The narrative, which is never explained well enough to have any real sense of depth and weight, involves a group of individuals collectively known as The Order, each of whom can trace his or her lineage back to Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. The Order keeps London safe from Lycans, which are what the game's in-world mythology calls half-human, half-beast hybrids that are clearly intended to be a take on the werewolf. In this sense, the game relies primarily on existing lore and typical horror stock characters, doing little to fully individualize them for this story. For no discernible reason, the narrative suddenly shifts partway through the game to also include vampires, who are being shipped to the so-called New World, as an escalation of the overall monstrous threat. Again, the overall threat, while treated very seriously in-game by its protagonists, never really creates a sense of danger, urgency, or scope. The Order's members take their names from Arthur's knights, including the player's avatar (Galahad), Percival, and even Arthur's mother, Igraine, and maintain a type of immortality and the ability to recover from most injury through the consumption of Blackwater, the origin of which never extends beyond it being a mystical liquid. Only one iteration of each knight exists at any one time, meaning, for example, a new Percival doesn't join The Order until the current one dies, as happens in the game when Percival sustains massive injuries without access to his Blackwater. Against this convoluted set of plot points, Galahad, whose real-world name is Grayson, finds out about the plan to export the vampires and traces the perpetrators to government officials who are in collusion with the evil United India Company. His pleas to The Order fall on deaf ears, of course, and he ends up striking out on his own and eventually breaking completely from The Order. The plot itself, while in some ways relying too heavily on well-trodden genre ground, provides some initially intriguing possibilities. Unfortunately, the narrative fails to develop them.

The player, embodying Galahad, spends the interactive portions of the game essentially moving in a linear fashion from one mission checkpoint to the next, at best. At worst, the player has no mechanism by which to "play"

the game in the sense of being more deeply invested in its goings on. Even though various environments within the game, such as a vivid rendering of the White Chapel district, are presented in breathtaking detail, there is simply nothing for the player to do. There are no side missions, nothing to further explore, and no attempt is really made to invest the player in the game's internal intrigue. While Galahad can, inexplicably, occasionally pick up useless objects and rotate them, he cannot otherwise make use of materials in the world. There are collectibles, including newspapers, but these are limited in number and add nothing to the mythos or sense of verisimilitude in the world. While these factors remove the game from consideration as a deeper example of digital storytelling, the structure calls into question the identity of the game itself. Several major portions of the game are essentially mini-movies, meaning that the player does not embody Grayson but simply watches the action during these non-interactive sequences. With older gaming consoles, when technology was far more limited, cut scenes like these served to give the player a chance to see the in-game world and the characters rendered with far greater clarity than they had during normal gameplay. In modern games, though, play modes look very similar to cut scenes, as they do in *The Order: 1886*. Therefore, the excessive use of cut scenes fails to make sense and removes the player too often from the narrative.

The game problematically relies on these cut scenes to move large swaths of the narrative forward, such that it reads more like a film and less like a video game, defeating the purpose of the digital storytelling format. Each chapter of *The Order: 1886* contains at least one cut scene or full-motion video. Worse still, some chapters are only cut scenes, as is the case with the pivotal 12th chapter: "A Traitor among Us." It is at this point that Grayson, thought to be a traitor, is brought before The Order for his alleged disloyalty. Despite the thinness of the game's narrative, this is the moment of highest emotional tension and, arguably, the point at which the player should feel the greatest sense of engagement, having embodied Grayson throughout the game. Yet the player is not allowed to participate in any scene in this chapter, not even to choose a dialogue cue or to move Grayson around the room. As Paul Tassi explains in his in-depth review of *The Order: 1886* for *Forbes*,

> It's beautiful, well-made, and engaging without being, in the least, fun. Combat is as dry as cover-based shooting gets, while any "puzzles" the game presents can be solved by looking around the room and finding the only object you can interact with. And with the player given absolutely no way to influence the story with his or her own decisions, the entire experience just feels like a misfired experiment. It looks pretty and sounds nice and even has a good story, but certainly no one is having any fun *playing* it ["*The Order: 1886* Is a Beautiful, Failed Experiment"].

Herein lies the fundamental issue of whether this work, as a whole, even qual-

ifies as a game. In parts, certainly, it does. But given that large portions of the plot, including most of its most pivotal and emotionally important moments, happen as cinematic sequences that serve to disembody the player from the story, the work fails to fully function as a game. By contrast, the story in *Heavy Rain* also relies heavily on cinematic elements, yet avoids the problems found in *The Order: 1886* by always centering the player as the focal point of all action and narrative beats. The player in *Heavy Rain* embodies several characters throughout the chapters or segments. Yet despite the game being set up to function essentially as a film, it is an *interactive* film. The player has choices and agency and can even make decisions resulting in the deaths of major characters, whose subsequent plotlines are then eliminated from the game. Even visual novels,[4] which vary in their level of choice or interaction with the player, periodically stop the text or conversation to allow the reader to catch up, if that has been a problem, or to have some agency over the speed at which the story unfolds. In *The Order: 1886*, the player is not allowed even those options.

Perhaps the primary reason critics and players have vocally challenged *The Order: 1886* for its failures, both narrative and mechanical, centers on its great, unrealized storytelling potential. Setting aside that the game never delves deeply into the mechanics of its own world and mythology, larger opportunities wither as well. The relationship between Grayson and Igraine, he being much older than she and the character who trains her, is fraught with not only sexual tension but also apparent genuine love between them. They do not act upon their desires due to their larger sense of duty to The Order. Yet the game hints that this conflicted sense of identity has been a source of strain between them. After Igraine is gravely injured early in the game, she says to Grayson, "I can't do this much longer. Not this life. We deserve better, you and I, together. We deserve better." This dialog not only centers on romantic conflict, it also touches on the morality of keeping The Order members immortal while leaving them vulnerable to injury. Although the Blackwater heals them, it does not make them immune to injury, so they suffer and verge on death in an endless cycle. This could have been a provocative line of narrative exploration in a post–9/11 American reality of endless deployments far from home.

Further tension is created when Grayson teams up with Lakshmi, the Indian leader of the plot to expose the United India Company. Lakshmi exists as both a competent leader and an eroticized Other within the game's cast of otherwise white main characters. The opportunity is lost to explore this character against a greater set of issues related to identity, the body, autonomy, and colonialism. Indrani Sen investigates the role of the Indian woman during England's colonized presence, noting, "The Indian female was sometimes associated with an exotic feminine mystique, the mythical sensuous appeal

of the hidden Indian women heightened by reports of their beauty and allure" (11), with specific attention paid to the idea of the veiled or sari-covered Indian woman. However, the point also has broader application as a commentary on the reality that these women become the eroticized and sexualized Other, having no real importance of their own as women. Lakshmi offers an even greater potential avenue for investigation because the character in the game is intended to be the historical figure Lakshmibai, the Rani of Jhansi, who was a pivotal figure of resistance in the Indian Rebellion of 1857. In the game, Lakshmi has acquired access to a vial of Blackwater, granting her the same form of immortality given to the knights. The Rani of Jhansi proves to be of critical importance and "was the subject of several mutiny novels written for Anglo-Indian and British metropolitan readers. Her iconography was charged with both the lasciviousness and deceit of Asian stereotypes and the nobility of an Indian 'Virangini' (a brave female heroine)" (Gavaskar 30). In the game, Lakshmi continues her fight symbolically against colonialism by seeking to expose and to destroy the United India Company. She remains the Other in the context of the game via her underground resistance yet also finds a way to forge a sense of camaraderie with Grayson, who does not eroticize her in his interactions with her. Instead, she remains narratively remote. Worse still, Igraine's overall reaction to Grayson's defection to Lakshmi's cause comes across as being as much about jealousy as about his abandonment of The Order, given that he tried to provide Igraine with the evidence she would need to join him in the true fight against evil. Igraine has been thoughtful and considered up until this moment, offering another means by which the narrative's simplicity fails its characters. She has also not been above questioning her overall role in The Order and its cost her to her personal life. Yet the narrative shifts such that Igraine is completely unreasonable and prepared to hunt down Grayson. A scene toward the very end of the game finds her literally gnashing her teeth in her fury, a moment so hyperbolic that it becomes unintentionally comical and further reduces Igraine to less than a fully realized female character. So the player is left with a hybridized form in *The Order: 1886*, neither fully a game nor fully a film. It hints at avenues of narrative exploration, yet abandons each in favor of making the game look flawless and photorealistic.

Although much of the focus of this book lies specifically in considering story, the intersection of community, story, and meaning also deserves attention in the analysis of the long-form game in this chapter and as a prefacing point of inquiry to the short-form analysis in the next. This community involvement aspect of gaming—the intersection of community and visual text—leads to intriguing connections between the digital narrative and social communities. These intersections are uniquely expressed, separate from communities built around literature or film. The primary distinction between the

gaming community and its interaction with storytelling and the latter two focuses on the ability of gamers to play together and to parse a complex digital narrative with one another. Even in a tight-knit book club, distance exists between the text and participant as well as with other club members. Members are unlikely to read passages aloud together. Instead, members interact alone with the text and then meet to discuss various elements of the story. If they were to have a fully participatory session in which members took turns reading passages aloud, a barrier would still remain: that of interactivity. It is only via the digital story that the player has active control over the text. Discussions of film inevitably run into the same lack of interactivity issue. A film exists as a static product that can be viewed and reviewed, then discussed, but cannot be experienced *en medias res*, the way a digital story may be. James Paul Gee asserts, "An academic discipline, or any other semiotic domain, for that matter, is not primarily content, in the sense of facts and principles. It is rather primarily a lived and historically changing set of distinctive social practices. It is in these social practices that 'content' is generated, debated, and transformed via certain distinctive ways of thinking, talking, valuing, acting, and, often, writing and reading" (21). In this sense, games can exist in different cultures in different ways, interpreted within the boundaries of that given culture. The social aspect of gaming, for those who play online multiplayer games or actively discuss them online as they are playing, is very reflective of a new iteration of culture, and gamers themselves continue to create and evolve the social aspects of gaming.

The emphasis here will be on how the interaction of an otherwise diverse set of gamers to complete quests or parse a storyline helps to create narrative meaning in unique ways, rather than on the strictly social aspect of gaming in which many players may participate. The latter example of community is no less essential for understanding the culture of gaming, but it is less directly relevant to the interaction between player and digital story. The August 2014 release of *P.T.* exemplifies the coming together of the gaming community to create narrative meaning. *P.T.*, which is not so much a title as it is an abbreviation of "Playable Trailer," was released as a teaser for a now-defunct sequel to the *Silent Hill* horror game franchise.[5] The *P.T.* demo contains about 45 minutes of content, once the player learns what needs to be done, but proves for most to be an hours-long, perhaps even frustrating, puzzle. The challenge of *P.T.* lies in its complete lack of context and direction. The game starts with the words "Watch out. The gap in the door … it's a separate reality. The only me is me. Are you sure the only you is you?" and the player, as the main character, awakening on the basement floor of a home. The room is stark, even menacing, and the only clue as to what the player should do next lies in him or her exiting the basement through its door, the only action available to the player save for walking aimlessly around the room.

From there, the game explores a powerful sense of fractured identity and creates both dread and paranoia due to its setting within narrow confines—the hallway traversing the first floor of a house, with most doors inaccessible to the player—but without ever giving the player any sense of situation. Even when Kafka begins *The Metamorphosis* with the improbable statement that Gregor has awoken from sleep to find himself transformed into an insect, there is still a frame of reference, something the reader can point to as the parameters of the fictive landscape. In the case of *P.T.*, the player, embodied in the first-person perspective, exits the basement only to discover an ever-changing house haunted by a mutilated female ghost whose lethality if she gets in close proximity to the player adds to the sense of terror. A radio plays a news story about a man who came home and shot his wife and his children, but there is no other temporal anchor and the player cannot be certain if he or she embodies that man. That event could have been last month, last week, or 10 years prior. It is also not initially evident which character the player is, whether the perpetrator of the crime, the victim, or someone completely outside of those events but somehow trapped within the house. It is only after the player is significantly immersed in the game that it becomes clear that the player's character is someone intimately connected with the crime, likely the murderer. This conclusion, though, is tenuous. The player has to interact with objects, such as family photographs, and eventually enters a hallway filled with eyes that seem to indicate either a gaze turned inward with loathing or the hate-filled gaze of the ghost in the house, both of which suggest that the protagonist's role is more than happenstance.

While the goal of *P.T.* is unclear at first, in retrospect it is the simplest goal: the player must successfully unlock the front door of the house and escape its horrors. Achieving this goal creates narrative tension and complicates the gameplay experience. As the player moves through the house, he or she moves along a circular track that will return the player to the game's beginning point on the first floor or, depending on the point in the game, return the player to the basement. However, with each successive loop through the main floor, changes occur to it, some subtle, some more obvious, requiring the player's vigilant attention to discern. For example, during one loop, the bathroom door unlocks, revealing a hideous, monstrous fetus crying in the sink.[6] During another loop, the player must interact with a picture to "burn out" one of its eyes. Again, the individual loops do not connect narratively in any significant way as the player completes them, and it is not obvious what the sum total of the player's actions may mean in terms of opening the front door. The most vexing puzzle, the final one of the game, requires the player to cause the ghost of a baby, presumably one of the murdered children, to laugh three different times during that loop. However, the game provides no clues about the necessity of the baby's laugh or that the third laugh

is ultimately the key that opens the door. Players are able to trigger the third laugh by more than one means, but not all methods work for all players.[7]

Many gamers, therefore, turn to the Internet—using "Let's Play"–style walkthroughs, written guides, and message boards—to work through the game and to decide what it all means, thus creating meaning external to the game itself. In terms of this typifying a particular form of social community, this interaction occurss not only after completing the work, gamers also share their experiences and their trial and error actions as they go along. The community that gathers on the *Imagine Games Network* (IGN) exemplifies this. IGN offers a variety of walkthroughs on its site, including community comments. In the case of *P.T.*, IGN's posted walkthrough was continuously updated and evolved as players gathered new information and proposed new hypotheses. Players were called on specifically to assist in deciphering the game and to add their own experiences in successfully achieving the elusive third laugh from the ghost baby. The site http://www.ign.com/wikis/silent-hills/P.T._Demo_Walkthrough maintained a running record of all the tips, suggestions, and hints. The resulting archive underscores the relationship between the gamer, the game, and a community of created meaning. The convergence of theories related to meaning reinforce the primacy of the player not only immersed in the text but also feeling a personal stake in it.

The promotional campaign for *P.T.* also capitalized on the sense of community and a shared experience, in this case of fear, with two trailers featuring gamers' reactions that were captured via a night vision camera as they played the game, rather than emphasizing the game itself. English and Japanese versions of the same overall idea were released, each with its own presentation and focus on gamer identity. The promotional campaign also underscored the denseness of the storytelling and gameplay, with the tagline in the English version that asked, "Will you decipher the enigma?" While the overall structure of each of the trailer versions remained identical—a series of gamers reacting in increasing terror to the events in the game—some slight variations prove interesting. The English trailer features a diverse group of gamers, both male and female. The Japanese trailer focuses exclusively on older Japanese women. Both of these choices focus on the diversity of the gaming community, as opposed to presenting a homogenous group of young male players. The older Japanese women are not depicted as being incompetent gamers. In the trailer, it is clear that they understand how to play games, and they wield their controllers adeptly, once again using the overarching call to community to typify what major media outlets tend to ignore as the true demographic of the gamer. Above all, the focus on gamers playing and the call to solve the mystery invite player interaction in a meaningful way. Instead of concentrating on the more fractious aspect of online gaming communities, *P.T.* encourages a focus on problem solving and shared movement toward the goal of completing the game.

P.T. serves as just one example of communities of gamers who come together to work through various games. This is analogous to film and book clubs in which groups of people, oftentimes from diverse backgrounds, come together to discuss, analyze, and interpret their favorite stories. In all three of these instances, those who have been captivated by a particular story work through their own ideas regarding meaning and compare their views with others. In the particular case of a digital narrative, this parsing of information takes on a more complex form. Gamers may come together to analyze the story, symbolism, and themes of a particular game or to discuss how to play the game itself, that is, how to achieve certain goals within the game so that the story continues to unfold. This can be as simple as learning how to find a particular area that the player wants to reach or as complex as seeking step-by-step advice for defeating a major boss within a game. Gamers may come together in a number of different ways. Certainly, meeting face-to-face to play together or to share the communal experience of gameplay always exists as an option. As in the case of *P.T.*, many players read and posted on message boards or left comment threads as they worked their way through the game. Players in a multiplayer game may also connect with one another via headset chat, using that interface to not only plan shared goals but also help one another and strategize in real time. Finally, players may view walkthrough-style videos of other players working through a game. Interaction with other gamers easily combines disparate elements, allowing for a complex nexus of interactivity.

Certainly, no gamer is ever required to seek out community support or assistance, in the same way that a book or film connoisseur may enjoy the pleasure of analyzing a story alone. Yet the increasing complexity of many games, including side quests, hidden objects, collectibles, and challenging environments, often induces gamers to search out one another, whether directly via a form like chat or indirectly via one player watching another player's videos.[8] Although this interactivity is a compelling subject, it is beyond the scope of this book. Indeed, as the study of storytelling and games continues to evolve, the intersection between text, meaning, player, and community will continue to be a critical avenue of investigation in video game studies.

The issue of narrative and player choice becomes even more complex with titles, such as the *Mass Effect* series, that introduce DLC components that add directly to the story, meaning that the story does not exist in one fixed form but evolves and continues to grow over the course of some months, perhaps even years, after the game's initial release. This poses an intriguing question: when is a digital narrative with planned DLC truly finished? *Mass Effect* is not unique in having several major pieces of storytelling released as optional purchases to gamers. Indeed, it is perhaps a hallmark of the com-

plexity of modern gaming that developers release a complex and involved game and then continue to add to the web of the story after its initial release. In the most mercenary sense, this keeps players financially invested in a given franchise. However, such a view overlooks the narrative complexity of these additions. The more complex question lies in determining to what extent, then, story-based DLC becomes necessary to have met the previously discussed definition of a game being "well played," especially when that content reveals critical new narrative information.[9] The answer defies simplicity. In the strictest sense, if the story continues into DLC, an argument can be made that the player who wants the fullest understanding of the story, its characters, and their world must therefore invest in playing this DLC. However, games always come to a close within the confines and boundaries of the game proper, such that DLC does not function precisely as a sequel. In the interest of producing scholarship about a given game title, it would certainly behoove the video game scholar to invest in not only the main narrative but also such elements as side quests and DLC. As Jin Ha Lee and her colleagues explore, "Clearly understanding the boundaries of and effectively describing content which does not initially come with video games at their points of purchase is a compounding problem for faithfully representing them as objects of interest in libraries and similar cultural heritage institutions" (237). While that point may first seem at odds with the discussion at hand, further inspection shows its importance. The boundaries of a digital narrative are simply not fixed in many cases. What at first appears to be a complete story—one that may be archived in a library, as in this example—may develop a few months or even a year or so down the line into an evolved text. The willingness to see "faithful" representation as more permeable in digital storytelling becomes an imperative. Whether an average gamer must invest similarly is not as easily answered. This book makes frequent reference to materials found in DLC and assumes that such narrative elements should be considered part of a larger discussion of that game's story. Certainly, DLC is canonical and furthers the complexities of the storyline. Yet the point must be conceded that DLC could be skipped in its entirety, and the player would still have a fully realized narrative at hand after having completed only the game proper and its ancillary materials, such as side quests.

The issue of DLC highlights the reasons that digital storytelling is a fascinating and meaningful iteration of storytelling. In the case of most books and films, sequels aside, the story proper ends with the book or the film. Sequels generally continue the main character or characters' story along a trajectory designed to cover more than one work before that story proper is complete. This is structurally different from DLC, which appends to the game proper and may well add significant components or complications to that narrative, but is not inherently necessary to bring that narrative thread to a

conclusion. Finally, DLC gives game developers the freedom to release a completed game and then gain the revenue necessary to re-invest in that title. The cost to develop games is now exorbitantly high. A case in point is the September 2015 release of *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*. The cost for development alone, exclusive of marketing costs, was around 80 million dollars. Practically speaking, this means that the developer needs to sell approximately five to six million copies of the game to reach a break-even point (Barder n.p.).[10] Clearly, the game developer would be under pressure to release a complete game to players to begin recouping part of that cost. It is therefore often impractical for a developer to hold a game until all the potential content that may be released as DLC modules instead gets placed in the main game. Digital storytelling thus opens a new avenue for the evolution of storytelling, one that may find the developers returning to a set of characters or a game world on more than one occasion to add to the story over a period of time in ways traditional forms of storytelling do not.[11]

The remainder of this chapter and the next chapter seek to accomplish two main goals. The first is to establish some overarching categories by which many games can be defined in terms of their storytelling. This includes the issues of length and scope as well as player choice within the game. The second goal is to examine storytelling within the games as they fit into these categories. As such, specific elements of these games as compelling examples of storytelling feature prominently within each category, including structural, thematic, and symbolic components. Care is taken to provide extended analyses of the games from both structural and storytelling points of view. How the digital landscape supports storytelling in ways that place it in line with or are markedly different from more traditional forms of storytelling are explored. A point reiterated throughout this book and repeated here is that digital storytelling continues to remain an emerging form. It changes as advancing technology allows developers to go further with this element, usually through length, clarity, and level of immersion. It changes as gamers continue their vital relationship with game developers and continue to seek out in-depth storytelling that provides a reflection of our common humanity, as all great storytelling does. It changes, as it has drastically within the last five years, as more indie game developers successfully source crowdfunding to tell stories that larger game developers find too risky. Scholars of digital storytelling must be willing, ready, and agile enough to consider these changes, rather than allowing investigations to become mired in an unchanging set of approaches.

As is the case in any instance in which categories are formed and presented, the grouping is not intended to account for every permutation of the digital narrative. Such a rigid definition would indeed run counter to the need for gaming study to retain a degree of agility as the form continues to

grow and develop. Two overarching criteria—game length and level of player choice—are used to sort the digital narratives in this chapter and the next, leading to the following five digital narrative categories: long-form storytelling with little player choice, long-form storytelling with high levels of player choice, long-form storytelling in which the player's choices shape the in-game environment, short-form games with little player choice, and small-scale games with high levels of player choice. The level of narrative depth and the commitment required by a player to complete a game are significantly higher once the 40-hour mark is crossed. As suggested earlier in this book, the usage of the term "long form" does not indicate a mark of quality. For example, a long-form game does not always trump a small, one-hour indie game in terms of the power and effectiveness of the story. Indeed, the opposite can be true as often as not. Furthermore, regardless of length but probably most directly relevant to the long form, games are *epic* in many ways: "they immerse us in *epic environments:* vast, interactive spaces that provoke feelings of curiosity and wonder" (McGonigal 98) and in this sense, transcend the boundaries set on them by length alone. The second major sorting criterion is the level of choice the player is given over the course of the game. While finer divisions would certainly be possible, this chapter focuses on two levels of player choice: high and low. As an example, *Silent Hill 2* is in the "low choice" category because even though the player's actions can impact the ending of the game, the number of choices are few. By contrast, a game series such as *Mass Effect* ranks as a "high choice" long-form narrative because the player can make many minor choices, everything from the protagonist's appearance and gender to the dialogue used throughout the game, as well as major decisions that impact the entire narrative arc. However, this does not imply that the player's ability to influence the ending of *Silent Hill 2* lacks significance. Again, it is simply a matter of scale. Choice itself, while a common hallmark of the digital narrative, need not be present for a compelling, heartrending story to unfold. *BioShock Infinite* allows the player to explore a bit of its various environments, but otherwise plays out along a linear plot. The few choices it offers players have no impact on the narrative itself. Yet this game emerges as a great modern masterwork of storytelling. Obvious overlap exists between the proposed categories, but the divisions also provide a means for considering the complexity of storytelling in gaming, rather than insisting on rigid categories into which all narratives must fit, as that leads necessarily to their individuality as stories being compromised. In order to fully explore how digital narratives function, the main emphasis here will be on examining sustained and developed analyses of storytelling across a variety of titles. This includes attention to structural hallmarks, such as symbolism and theme, as well as consideration of how the digital format specifically impacts the storytelling of each title discussed here.[12]

Games with Long-Form Storytelling and Little to No Player Choice

Video games contain, analogous to their written narrative counterparts, what Roland Barthes describes as "cardinal functions," that is, interlocking plot events and "catalysers" or complementary events (51). While Barthes related this term to literature, it also serves, as do many concepts related to the study of literature, the study of digital storytelling. In the case of video games, the forms of these foundational storytelling elements are analogous but not identical. In digital storytelling, these elements can take the form of narration, dialogue, or even found objects within the environment. Elements that may be either wholly irrelevant or not mentioned at all in other forms of storytelling emerge as being of utmost importance in a digital story. For example, in all of the *BioShock* games, the background material, propaganda, found objects, such as audio recordings, and encounters with non-player characters all provide the "catalysers" critical to the full development of the cardinal functions. *BioShock Infinite*'s complex narrative proves especially true of the need for these subordinate elements to be given closer consideration, and its opening half hour or so of gameplay serves as an insightful iteration of these concepts.

The game's highly immersive environment invites the player to pay close attention to environmental clues from the very opening moments of the game. Many of the symbols and images presented in these first minutes of gameplay, when the player reflects on them again as the narrative continues to unfold and then concludes, provide what the very best stories do: the opportunity to reconsider first assumptions. An example detailing this narrative complexity happens when the player who embodies the protagonist Booker DeWitt enters a lighthouse.[13] A song loops in the background, perhaps jarring to the player because it sounds to the modern ear distinctly anachronistic. The song, "Old-Time Religion," which predicts the world of religious fundamentalism awaiting the player shortly in the floating city of Rapture, becomes almost immediately juxtaposed against a small washbasin with a quaint, cross-stitched sign hanging above it bearing the ominous message "Of thy sins I will wash thee." This seemingly innocuous moment proves to be crucial. The moment is also tied to the relevance of choice, or perhaps the illusion of it, in the game. If the player approaches the basin, he or she is given the option to use it. If the option is selected, Booker will gaze into the basin, affording the player a critically important distorted look at Booker's reflection, one of the few times in the game the player sees himself or herself in the third person as Booker, and, arguably, this is the clearest of those instances. He will ultimately scoff at the idea that one can so simply wash away sins and

will walk away. Thus, it is a moment that the player may miss or ignore. Indeed, given that the lighthouse interior hardly seems inviting, the player may have avoided touching or using the basin out of fear that this would lead to a negative outcome. Yet, as is the case with many games, curiosity and the willingness to engage are rewarded. This scene likely will not re-enter the player's mind until very late in the game, when the narrative reveals that Booker DeWitt is an iteration of the game's antagonist, Prophet Comstock.[14] The images of baptism form the backdrop of the makeup of both Comstock and DeWitt as men, as the decision over whether or not to be born-again and baptized sets the entire narrative in motion. A careful player may have noticed Booker's reflected image in the basin and perhaps considered, although the game deliberately obscures this, that Comstock and DeWitt share a vague resemblance to each other. This resemblance is deliberately rendered more obscure given that the Comstock of the game is a bearded old man and Booker is in his late thirties. Circling back to Barthes, the example of the basin, both as a static symbol and also as an object with which the player can choose to briefly interact, functions as an important "catalyser."

BioShock Infinite's narrative is built on "catalysers," as defined by Roland Barthes, capitalizing on the digital form as an integral component of its storytelling. In addition to small moments, such as the player's interaction with the basin, the world abounds with rich detail. The environment itself—Columbia and all of the individual areas therein visited by the player—adds not only to the verisimilitude of the world but also to the information the player learns about this world. A novel or short story, as a counter example, depends solely on those areas the author opts to call to the reader's attention. Indeed, no story is written at a level of detail such that every building within the landscape has a description. Rather, attention is paid to a representative few buildings or to other environmental details integral to the plot. With film, the viewer's eye is restricted by the camera lens, which in turn is under the control of the director's eye. If the viewer notices someone interesting in a crowd scene, for example, as the camera pans away, so too ends the opportunity for further exploration. In a digital story, by contrast, the player is free to peruse these elements at his or her chosen pace. The elements of interest in *BioShock Infinite* take many forms, from artwork to graffiti, from overheard conversations to found audio recordings. The recordings in this game, called Voxophones, serve to connect the player to a wider narrative experience. Some of the recordings are made by major characters, such as Comstock, and provide vital backstory to the main narrative. Others provide compelling secondary information to the story. As an example of the latter, the player has an opportunity to discover a Voxophone that is partially concealed. Depending on how the player chooses to enter that area and deal with the combat, the Voxophone may not be placed directly in his or her path, which

again illustrates how crucial exploration is to digital storytelling, which in turn feeds into the concept of a game being well-played. This particular Voxophone contains a horrific account of Preston Downs capturing a young Native American boy in a bear trap. Downs certainly is no saint, having been hired by Comstock to hunt down the revolutionary group, the Vox Populi, and their leader, Daisy Fitzroy. Downs has been trying to capture one of Daisy's couriers, but to his horror, he realizes that she is "using kids now." The moment underscores one overarching thematic component of the game: no one is really a "good guy," and no one has the moral high ground. Perhaps some skepticism may arise around the idea that the player can miss facets of the larger narrative, such as the Voxophone of Downs. However, digital storytelling is often built on a foundation that begins with a core narrative—a key set of pieces the player must get through to reach the ending of the game. It becomes more complex than other forms of storytelling in that the player's own level of engagement provides the opportunity for the narrative to deepen. The additional story serves as a player's reward and incentive.

A further examination of choice and the illusion of choice in *BioShock Infinite* reveals that besides the washbasin, *BioShock Infinite* offers few subsequent choices. The few remaining choices that the player encounters do not ultimately change the story outcome because the game does not have multiple endings or multiple narrative threads based on choice but instead feeds into the underlying themes of futility and repetition of atrocity. The narrative proper will unfold in only one manner no matter what the player does or does not opt to do with the choices presented. Furthermore, *BioShock Infinite* offers little in the way of optional quests outside the main narrative. The game presents two types of optional minor side quests, opening two locked chests and solving three ciphers, which require the player to backtrack to certain areas after later gaining keys or clues. These optional quests reward the player with items and sometimes yield Voxophones, but their overall contribution to the narrative is minimal. The critical questions then become *why* the game present any choices and what significance they hold. *BioShock Infinite* offers four choices, although only the first two, encountered chronologically, will be discussed in detail here.[15] Benedict Anderson considers the role of religious thought and construction of the self, arguing, "religious thought also responds to obscure intimations of immortality, generally by transforming fatality into continuity (karma, original sin, etc.). In this way, it concerns itself with the links between the dead and the yet unborn, the mystery of regeneration" (11). *BioShock Infinite* holds as a central concern the dangers of theocratic tyranny coupled with a prophetic leader who may actual have started to believe in his own created mythology. Anderson's ideas bring to mind, then, the game's focus on contradiction not only in terms of the split between what the game's characters actually do and the people they choose

to believe that they are, but specifically in terms of how such contradictions manifest when they intersect with religious beliefs. The game posits, then, that there are no real choices, just outcomes borne out of free will weighted by deep flaws of self whereby the same choices end up being made across countless lifetimes. Perhaps, this begins to make clear why the game focuses on few choices and why those few decisions effect no real change.

The next choice the player encounters in the game provides what is arguably both its most shocking and grotesque moment. The narrative wastes no time in moving the player from the lighthouse setting at the start of the game to the floating city of Columbia. From there, accounting for the time the player takes to explore the initial parts of Columbia that are accessible, it takes about 20 to 30 minutes to come upon a situation that quickly devolves. The citizens of Columbia are in a festive mood, celebrating with a citywide fair and the broadly advertised raffle of 1912. When the player embodying Booker arrives at the scene, it seems like a wonderful party. Everyone is singing a rousing rendition of "Irene, Goodnight," and they are gathered before a stage festooned in red curtains. Booker obtains a baseball from a citizen passing them out, and it appears that this baseball serves as his raffle ticket because the number 77 is inscribed on it. From here, things go rapidly downhill. It is not simply a matter of calling numbers and finding the winners with the corresponding baseballs. First, the good citizens of Columbia are going to participate in a stoning or sorts, utilizing baseballs instead of rocks. Columbia, it turns out, is lethally racist and this one wrenching sequence provides the player with all the narrative detail needed to reach that conclusion. An interracial couple—a white man and black woman who dared to marry but were discovered—are brought onto a stage. After the emcee of the event makes a few repugnant comments, the player is given the choice to throw the baseball at either the emcee or the couple. Unlike the other choices in the game, this one has a timer—the player is not allowed the time to fully ponder all the possible outcomes of the choice. The choice is presented, as much as is possible, as a knee-jerk reaction. As Diana Mafe argues, "The sinister implications of the scene are now evident. The seemingly down-home raffle is a masquerade for a lynch mob, and the innocuous baseballs, symbols of a favorite American pastime, are the execution tools" (89), reifying for the player that Columbia beats with a rotten heart. The swiftly dwindling timer leaves the player with seconds to decide what to make of the nightmare that is unfolding and opt for a course of action, unless the player opts out of the choice and simply allows the timer to wind down. The outcome of the scene plays out the same—it will simply be a matter of which way Booker moves to aim the baseball before being identified by police officers as the feared "False Shepherd." The psychological and emotional implications of this choice resonate with emotional weight. Those who would throw the ball at the couple

because they themselves are racist exist in the world. However, such a vile motivation does not warrant discussion here. It is also possible that a player would throw the ball at the couple out of fear. Clearly, at this point, things are devolving in the story. The player may reason that conformity here may stave off some graver consequence. Unfortunately, this is a mirror held to the real world in which peer pressure causes either inaction or worse, complicity. Many players, arguably, would immediately make the opposite choice and throw the ball at the emcee, regardless of the consequences.[16] As much as this choice-based scenario reveals inequity and racial hatred in Columbia, so too does it place the player, uncomfortably, as a focal point of these attitudes.

The next choice the player encounters involves a necklace for Elizabeth, who in reality is Booker DeWitt's daughter but who, at this point in the game, the player and Booker believes is the young woman DeWitt has been contracted to find and recover. As the pair explores Battleship Bay, an amusement area, they come across an eccentric brother and sister, Robert and Rosalind Lutece, although they are later revealed to be the lynchpins in much of what has happened in the game and in events predating it. The Luteces offer Elizabeth a choice of pendants for her necklace: a bird or a cage. She asks Booker, therefore the player, to choose for her, and she does not tip-off the player by stating a preference. Instead, she says something positive about each choice. Elizabeth will wear the chosen pendant for the remainder of the game, so the selection becomes permanent, and the player certainly may decide based solely on aesthetics. Yet the choice is also haunting because the player has already learned that Elizabeth spent the first 19 years of her life imprisoned, and her supposed "rescue" by Booker has already gone quite poorly. So the player may opt for the cage, as it symbolizes the state of her life. Or the bird may be selected as a sign of hope. What the player will learn as the narrative comes to its conclusion is that hope runs in short supply in Columbia and in *BioShock Infinite*. The cage may be more thematically fitting, signifying only the illusion of true freedom, or perhaps a bird with its wings clipped. Ominously, the empty cage might signify a bird who has died for want of freedom. Catlyn Origitano argues, "Although Elizabeth spends a great deal of time in cages, she is eventually liberated" (44), and while this proves true perhaps to a certain extent, it does not ultimately make the bird pendant the choice that the developers appear to want players to make. Indeed, whether Elizabeth is ever free and whether freedom really equates to a type of self-chosen oblivion loom over the narrative.

Because it is clear that choice is not a vital component of *BioShock Infinite*'s narrative, even though the few choices offered to the player deepen the overall gaming experience, attention should be paid to the points the narrative emphasizes along its more linear path. In particular, this game focuses on building a taut and compelling story that, as does any great work of literature

or film, comments on culture in powerful ways while also dealing with much more philosophically complex material. A closer analysis will be offered here for a few select elements of this masterfully written narrative. One focal point is that the story deliberately sets up a player's expectations by seeming to play into expected tropes, only to constantly upend them. A primary example of this occurs early in the game, when the player is given the task of finding and then "rescuing" Elizabeth. The gameplay interface shows the player's objective or mission as a tersely worded banner across the top of the screen, and the player can access this banner at any time. When Booker first enters Columbia, he does not know where to find Elizabeth. It is only a bit later that he learns she is being held prisoner in the ominously named Tower of the Lamb, with all of its allusion to the crucified Jesus. One banner reads, "Go to Monument Island and Find the Girl." The mission banners related to finding Elizabeth in this early part of the game refer to her as "the Girl."[17] Coupled with her prison being a tower, the player likely forms images of the heroic Booker storming in to save a fair maiden from her captivity. Nothing, however, is what it seems. Given that Elizabeth is really Booker's daughter, even though he does not learn this until near the end of the game, the narrative eschews the traditional role of Elizabeth as the virginal romantic interest of the hero. More importantly, once Booker enters the tower and prepares to enter the set of rooms where she is being held prisoner, it becomes obvious that she really does not need him, although this does complicate matters somewhat. Elizabeth has the power to open existing Tears,[18] and Booker witnesses her open one in her room to the Paris of the 1980s. Although he sees her momentarily step through the Tear, she returns to the room in the tower. So Booker realizes that Elizabeth could always have freed herself, and she admits the same to him later, along with her inability to reason through why. This asks the player to consider deeper exploration into the game's overarching themes of personal freedom and the weight of torture and conditioning. Suffice it to say that the player as Booker enters the Tower of the Lamb believing that he will likely have to fight all sorts of enemies to rescue Elizabeth. Instead, he discovers that the workers in the tower have all but fled out of terror of her powers and that she has only one warden, the fearsome Songbird. Yet even then, Elizabeth's ability to open Tears allows her to circumvent her jailer, should she so choose.

Once Booker flees the tower with Elizabeth, she continues to prove herself no typical damsel in distress. The player never embodies Elizabeth,[19] yet she remains an integral component to the story, as well as to gameplay. Except for sequences of the game in which the pair are separated, Booker and Elizabeth work as a cooperative team to overcome enemies. Elizabeth never needs protecting during these combat scenes, and the player is specifically told, once Elizabeth joins Booker, that she will tend to herself. Furthermore, although she has no experience, logically, with combat, she proves resourceful

and will often come to Booker's rescue by offering him ammo, health items, or Salts.[20] During the one sequence in which Elizabeth becomes imperiled—later in the game when Comstock successfully has her recaptured and takes her to be tortured into compliance—the game refuses to play into standard tropes or to infantilize Elizabeth. Booker finally reaches Elizabeth, but not because of his strength or inherent masculine competence. Indeed, he is unable to reach her because he is defeated again and again, across multiple timelines, by the Songbird. Instead, Elizabeth musters tremendous strength from where she is imprisoned and opens a Tear to pull Booker ahead through time by several months, effectively allowing him to bypass the Songbird. The player is then required to shut down two power generators operating the medical /torture cell where Elizabeth has been kept. Once the power is cut, Elizabeth is able once again to open Tears. She does so violently and effectively, killing all of her remaining captors. By the time Booker reaches Elizabeth, there is nothing left for him to do but disconnect her from the medical devices and help her straighten her clothing. Her reaction at this point proves meaningful. She is not cowed by her torture, and she does not run into Booker's arms for solace. She burns with fury and announces her intention to kill Comstock. When Booker initially appears to countermand this, she re-opens the Tear and asks him pointedly, "Really Booker? What are you going to do to stop me?" She fully realizes her power and never needs anyone, male or female, to provide her with meaning or agency in the narrative. Her choices—even her initial decision to remain in the Tower of the Lamb—are complicated, but are clearly her own.

Circling back to the earlier issue of choosing a pendant for Elizabeth, nothing is made clearer here even as Elizabeth comes into her full power and rejects Booker as some sort of father–savior. Indeed, Elizabeth's unraveling of the entire truth of her existence and identity provides no comfort, as she feels the weight of all the other Elizabeths who have existed along all the other possible timelines. The game, near the closing moments, gives the player glimpses of those Elizabeths, some of whom look even more harrowed and haunted than the Elizabeth who has suffered so much in the game's main story. Elizabeth concludes that her only choice is to use her powers to try to kill all of the Comstocks who have ever existed. She attempts this by killing the player's Booker at the moment in which he exists in a state of flux: a man who has not yet chosen to be baptized and born again into Comstock. She reasons that Booker's death at this moment will prevent any Comstocks from coming into existence. However, after she and the other Elizabeths drown Booker, there is one last price to pay. One by one, the other Elizabeths disappear, their existence tied to Booker and to Comstock. The game plays somewhat coy by panning away from the game's original Elizabeth before she does, or perhaps does not, disappear, and then complicates matters in the two *Burial*

at Sea DLC modules with appearances, again, of several Elizabeths.[21] Despite the player's own interpretation of which Elizabeth or Elizabeths these women may be, the game's original Elizabeth has failed to stop the existence of Comstock and Booker if any Elizabeth continues to exist. If Elizabeth, then, finds any sense of freedom, it is measured, intrinsically bound to a willingness to negate her own existence and the reality that true freedom from Comstock's tyranny and Booker's moral failings may be impossible.

The next game to be considered in the long-form category is the 2013 release of *The Last of Us*, a post-apocalyptic exploration of the nature of morality that illustrates the assertion that choice need not drive a digital narrative to provide it with a storytelling backbone and that shares with *BioShock Infinite* a devastating look into the depravity of which humans are capable. In this game, Joel, an older and completely disillusioned protagonist, ends up safeguarding 14-year-old Ellie, who has immunity to the Cordyceps fungal infection that has wiped out most of humanity. As will be explored a bit further on, that simple narrative starting point becomes both heartbreaking and morally complex. The game is played in the third-person point of view, with Joel as the fulcrum, save for one sequence where Ellie acts as the fulcrum. Effectively, as is the case with third-person games focusing on a particular protagonist, the player embodies Joel for most of the game and Ellie for a portion of it.[22] Similar to the other examples in this category, the game offers few narrative choices. The choices that do exist relate mostly to the mechanics of the gameplay itself and do not otherwise impact the way the story plays out. The game's artificial intelligence adapts, for example, to the manner in which the player moves through the game. While combat proves unavoidable in many instances, scenarios exist in which the player can attempt stealth to sneak past enemies. The player, in this sense, chooses the level of violence to some extent. In addition, killing enemies and leaving their bodies out in the open alerts other enemies to the player's presence. The issues of risk, preference for or against combat, and patience for stealth converge such that the player has a more direct influence on the ludological components of the game. Other moments of choice intersect with the player's levels of world exploration and inquisitiveness of found objects, or in his or her interactions with Ellie. Ellie finds a book of jokes early in the game and at set points reads these cringe-worthy jokes to Joel in scenes that highlight the last vestiges of her childhood and a growing bond between Ellie and Joel. The player has to pay attention to Ellie and explore the environment carefully and fully or lose these moments entirely. Ellie reads these jokes at specific locations within the game, but does not signal in advance as she prepares to do so. The player has to notice Ellie taking out her joke book and must then approach her. Ellie's jokes add nothing to the narrative on a larger scale. Like the choices in *BioShock Infinite*, however, they add to the overall atmosphere of the

narrative. In this case, these brief moments of welcome respite from an otherwise bleak story allow the player a rest, but also further develop the burgeoning father–daughter bond between Joel and Ellie.

The opening sequence of the game provides the player with a strong grounding in the perspective of Joel, the game's protagonist. Moreover, it provides the player with a powerful sense of space and place, as the game begins far in Joel's past, rather than in the reality of his present. Tzvetan Todorov argues, "The beginning of the text presents the description of a state of affairs. That does not suffice for narrative, however, as narrative requires the unfolding of an action, change, difference" (28). This proves to be useful for considering the game's opening sequence, which starts 20 years prior to the start of the narrative proper and sets the stage for the Cordyceps infection and Joel's rage. The quote also proves important for consideration here in that it demonstrates that concepts utilized to analyze one form of storytelling, in this case specifically the written, also apply to other forms. Of the singular importance of the role of a story asserting its own strong sense of purpose from its opening pages, Lisa Cron writes, "Simply put, we are looking for a reason to care. So for a story to grab us, not only must something be happening, but also there must be a consequence we can anticipate. As neuroscience reveals, what draws us into a story and keeps us there is the firing of our dopamine neurons, signaling that intriguing information is on its way" (13). When taken in tandem with Todorov's ideas about the importance of a "state of affairs," what emerges, then, is an imperative for storytelling to immediately resonate with a reader, or a player. The game's opening 20 minutes or so begins on the night the infection begins to spread in earnest, as terrified people try to evacuate their towns and cities, and the confused and overwhelmed military and law enforcement officials are as likely to kill those fleeing as those infected. Yet these scenes of chaos and the degradation of morality and society serve to augment both the character embodied by the player through nearly all of the game—Joel—and to establish organically for the player why it is that Joel will later bond, carefully and perhaps even grudgingly, with Ellie, the game's other primary protagonist. In the very opening minutes of the game, Joel is a jovial man and an attentive and loving father. This might be called the initial state of affairs, as delineated by Todorov: a single father raising his preteen daughter Sarah. Within a few minutes, both in-game and in real life, everything falls apart, and the narrative quickly shifts to one of action, change, and chaos. Joel, Sarah, and Joel's brother Tommy end up in a car crash while trying to flee. Sarah is injured in the crash and eventually, with Joel carrying her, the pair comes upon a member of the military. Tommy has remained behind to try to keep the infected people from catching up to the pair. The young military man receives an order to shoot them, perhaps out of a misguided attempt to contain any possibility of infec-

tion, and Sarah dies, slowly and painfully, from her wound. The loss of his daughter haunts the story and Joel, as her death represents a breaking away from order, civility, and the relative comforts of the law. In their moment of crisis, Joel trusted that he and Sarah would be safe with law enforcement. This visceral loss of his daughter also provides a point of emotional narrative connection to players across gender and cultural lines. Even if one has not directly experienced the loss of a child, that potential exists as a primal fear for nearly everyone. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly in terms of the prologue serving an important narrative function, the loss centers the player's attention on Joel and on his experiences, as the player remains embodied as Joel through the family's harrowing attempt at an escape from the infection. In the prologue, emphasis is placed on the light of the full moon illuminating the horrors unfolding. This is juxtaposed against the light from the soldier's gun scope as he fires on Joel and Sarah. What the Cordyceps infection fails to do in terms of decimating human numbers, humans will do themselves. That moment, the moment of Sarah's death, changes Joel forever. It also sets up the next major change in the narrative, a time jump forward 20 years to a much older and embittered Joel.[23]

The central focus on Joel's sense of alienation and embitterment due to his daughter's death remains the narrative's central focus and arc. Later in the game finds Joel and Ellie at the University of Eastern Colorado and under siege by hunters, the game's global term for survivors who are hostile to any others, killing them on sight both for pleasure and to loot the bodies. Joel is grievously wounded during the battle, and the player continues to embody him. With Ellie desperately prodding Joel to move forward, the player faces an intense situation. Joel must continue trying to shoot the remaining hunters, who are attempting to prevent the pair's escape and to harm Ellie. However, as the wound physically hampers Joel, he moves slowly and is sluggish for the player to control. This provides clear examples of how immersion becomes an integral part of storytelling, and how, in this particular case, the mechanics of gameplay are utilized to heighten the player's feelings of terror and frustration as Joel falters, struggles, and sometimes falls. Additionally, the sequence underscores the growing bond between Ellie and Joel, who have slowly and carefully begun to forge a bond of surrogate daughter and surrogate father. In this case, the player, embodying Joel, is still forced to try to keep Ellie safe from the hunters descending on them. Here, though, the narrative shifts just a bit. The scene focuses now on Ellie cajoling, encouraging, and otherwise compelling Joel to move, even perhaps past the point of his body's ability. In so doing, the narrative begins to fold back to what has always been of primary importance, even against the more fantastical elements of infection and the pressures of living within the resulting broken society: a story of a father and daughter, each alone in the world but struggling to protect something

precious—love—in the face of hardship. The human element of this plot line eschews the need for the game to allow or invite the player to make numerous choices related to its unfolding. The player *is* Joel. The player has seen Joel's losses and pain and now experiences these giving way to a thawing of his heart and his reluctant but undeniable shift toward investing himself as a father again.

While the game's central focus remains on how its broken world impacts Joel and Ellie—and how this fractured world will set the parameters by which Joel, especially, will shape his final moral choices—the game keeps at the forefront the realities of the Cordyceps infection. The narrative focuses on the horrors of losing one's mental faculties and control to the infection, drawing intriguing parallels to Joel's own initial—but lasting decades—loss of self-identity on the night of Sarah's death. Within the game, the Cordyceps fungus needs only about 12 hours at the most to take full control of its host and create a "runner," an infected host whose physical body has not yet been transformed by the latter stages of infection. During the time as a runner, presumably, the human host slowly loses control of his or her faculties, with the earliest hours of the process being unfathomably horrifying. The nature of what it is to be human functions as a primary theme in the game's narrative, in close conjunction with the related concept of what it means to maintain a sense of morality after all structures compelling it, the courts, jails, and the like, have been eradicated. Some of the human characters in the game, despite the narrative carefully avoiding making anyone wholly perfect, try to adhere to a more beneficial sense of their moral codes. Others hunt survivors for sport. With this ever-present conflicted series of moral constructions, the narrative explores both the fungal infection and the larger construction of human identity as a result of the spreading infection. Sam, a boy close in age to Ellie, who, along with his brother Henry, travels for a while with Ellie and Joel, discusses with her how the infection affects its host. This discussion occurs without Ellie, or the player, realizing that Sam has been infected; he turns into a runner before the following morning. Sam wonders, "What if the people are still inside?" Ellie responds, "They might still look like people, but that person is not there anymore." This applies to not only humans infected with the fungus but also any number of survivors who strike with cruelty at their changed world or drop all pretenses at morality because they can or adopt a moral code that allows for survival of the self, at the potential sacrifice of others. People, as a larger construct of communities with cultural backgrounds, histories, and more, are no longer present. This new reality forecasts the game's final act, and Joel's final choice to save Ellie even at the loss of a possible cure for the infection, positing that the only meaningful connections remaining are at the level of the family, not a larger community or nation.

The game's exploration of morality, both as embodied through the player's

experiences as Joel and via the larger breakdown of human moral codes of behavior, allows for a richer discussion of the complex relationship between a player's own lived morality and the ethical codes within the story. As part of his larger focus on the potential for games to have ethical value, Miguel Sicart (2009) argues, "Games are activities in which agents engage with a system designed to encourage the achievement of certain goals with predetermined means" (193). Certainly, these ludological features are a requirement of game completion and thus must be performed by the gamer. In most segments of *The Last of Us*, these goals consist of avoiding, subduing, or killing enemies or solving environmental puzzles, such as reaching the top floor of a building after the elevator crashes into the flooded basement. Yet even during these moments of structural gameplay, meaning those segments where the gamer is following preset rules to move through an area, the narrative weight remains. For example, as Ellie and Joel navigate through any given area, their conversation concentrates on their lives, their fears, and their thoughts about their situation. The gamer, although embodied as Joel, does not use the controller or his or her own impetus to initiate the majority of these conversations. While a gamer could arguably mute the sound or ignore the dialogue, the conversations are so inherent to the gameplay experience that a gamer who discounts most of the game's content is really a nonparticipant who is not playing the game as intended. In addition, many of the game's cut scenes, those video segments that do not involve the active participation of the gamer, are woven into the game's mechanics and main plotline. Although the especially impatient gamer could skip or refuse to be engaged by not watching the cut scenes, it would be perilous to argue that the game loses impact as a study of ethics and morality—both within the story and the gamer's self-examination—simply because a small percentage of players refuse to play the game as it was intended. To present a parallel example, if a reader simply started to skim large parts of a book, thereby missing significant plot points and thematic elements, fault would not be leveled against the book for failing to provide a proper or complete narrative. The blame would fall on the reader for failing to be engaged and to invest in the text, as was discussed in the opening chapter of this book while exploring the concept of a game "well played." The game's examination of the construction of morality develops because the player must explore the narrative as a component of completing the mechanics of the gameplay to reach its end. Given this, it becomes imperative to consider what the game's narrative asserts with regard to what it means to be human and how little it might take for people to shift or lose a sense of moral purpose. Arguably, the stories with the power to resonate across both large audiences and geographic and temporal boundaries are those that reflect the core of broader human experience. As Lisa Cron states, "The universal is the portal that allows us to climb into the skin of characters

completely different from us and miraculously feel what they feel" (33). *The Last of Us* takes an unfamiliar, even fantastical setting—a post-apocalyptic world ravaged by violence and infection—and reifies it for the player through Joel's very human story and plaintive sense of loss.

Given that video games utilize space and place as an inherent storytelling tool, it follows, then, that *The Last of Us* juxtaposes the reconfiguration of human morality against decaying American urban and suburban backdrops. Everywhere that Joel and Ellie travel, a marked difference exists between the relative calm of the natural world, which has reclaimed both the vast cities and urban sprawl of human culture, and the creaking, unstable, and rusted remnants of all of humanity's progress. The pair initially moves west, traveling from Boston to Salt Lake City before returning to Jackson County, Wyoming. Along the way, they encounter symbolic hallmarks of American progress, such as the University of Eastern Colorado and a hospital in Salt Lake City. All are ruined, the survivors scattered, dead, or infected. As Oli Welsh (2013) notes, "It's the classic journey into the West, the pioneers tale—but turned on its head, because this anti–Western isn't about the birth of a nation. It's about the death of one" (n.p.). Welsh's point is supported further by the inclusion of an American colonial history museum, most likely a mimetic reimagining of Boston's Commonwealth Museum. The record of American history lies broken and forgotten on its infection-infested floors. However much America has died as a culture and an ideal, the remains of the cities through which Joel and Ellie travel thrive with new life. The natural world—plants, animals, birds, and the like—exists unfettered, and the cities are eerily beautiful in their new verdant form. The buildings are potentially lethal now, as many are barely standing. This speaks to the little hold humans have over their environment, as within two decades, hundreds of years of progress are easily swallowed. This is not nature "red in tooth and claw," as envisaged by Alfred, Lord Tennyson, but nature capable of beating humans at their own game. In one darkly humorous sequence, monkeys formerly used as test subjects at the University of Eastern Colorado now dominate the campus. In one of the game's most peaceful and beautiful moments, Joel and Ellie come across a herd of giraffes in Salt Lake City, long free of the confines of the zoo and thriving. By contrast, to their continued detriment, human survivors have not found a way to cope. Their fences, trip wires, and the like prove ineffective against the infection, failing every time. Every survivor enclave visited by Joel and Ellie is overrun or infiltrated by the infection. Many survivors choose to isolate themselves further from the natural world, instead of trying to understand it, by hiding in decayed buildings and quarantine zones. Ellie admits to having never walked through the woods. Throughout all of these scenes, the player acts as an observer to both the ruined American landscape and the remnants of her citizens.

A consideration of the larger thematic implications of *The Last of Us*[24] as they relate to the resolution of the narrative closes the analysis of the game. Joel initially makes an agreement to smuggle Ellie into a medical facility run by a resistance group called the Fireflies. The Fireflies, unlike the dysfunctional remnants of the centralized government, believe, perhaps foolishly, that a cure for the infection is possible. As Joel bonds to Ellie, although she is a painful reminder of his own deceased daughter, he increasingly assumes a fatherly role. The game's narrative then hinges on Joel's decision to rescue Ellie from the Fireflies when he learns that they intend to dissect her living brain—thus sacrificing her life—for the possibility of a cure. Gone are the larger vistas and the sense of an open, albeit ruined, world marking most of its previous environment. Here, the game's focus narrows—literally and spatially—to a claustrophobic hospital and returns to its original narrative beat, that of a father desperate to save his daughter. The final harrowing sequences, which find the player embodying Joel trying to reach the surgical room where Ellie is about to killed, lead to one minor but thematically relevant choice. When the player finally reaches the surgical bay, the medical staff in attendance is not armed, but the armed Fireflies are close on Joel's trail. Joel grabs the surgeon, as part of a cut scene, and stabs him in the neck, killing him. At that point, one of the nurses calls Joel "a fucking animal," but none of them move against him. The player can opt at this point to kill all the remaining personnel. This choice does not impact the story in any way other than to provide an opportunity for the player to assert agency on the in-game world, and the choice dovetails with the difficult exploration of morality that the game considers all the way through. Two examples of different approaches demonstrate the complexity. In the first case, the player does not move against the personnel because they are not an active threat and because the Firefly soldiers will hunt him down upon hearing the chaos. Killing the personnel makes no difference in that reality. In the second case, the player acts in a moment of frustration, rage, and horror against a group of people who have been blinded by the false salvation of a cure and kills them out of a sense of righteous fury.[25]

In his final confrontation with Marlene, the leader of the Fireflies and once thought to be an ally to Joel and Ellie, Joel, but not the player embodying Joel, opts for one of two possible moral choices. Marlene first tries to convince Joel to "do the right thing" and give up Ellie to her group. Their plan, since Ellie has natural immunity to the infection, is to kill her and study her tissue in the hopes of distilling a vaccine. Marlene reasons, ruthlessly, that Ellie is likely to end up raped or murdered if left alive, so it is better to kill her while she may be of use. Joel wounds Marlene with a bullet to her torso but then pauses to consider. She begs for her life, a plea that Joel counters with "You'll just come after her," before he chooses to kill Marlene. Of all the killings Joel

carries out in the game, this is the most personal. Despite some players perhaps objecting to his choice, Joel is not wrong about the Fireflies. There is every indication that Marlene, if left alive, would mount incessant and violent efforts to find Joel and Ellie. Given that she knew and was once close to his brother Tommy, if Marlene could track down Tommy in Jackson County, she would have a good chance of finding Ellie and also of putting everyone in that community at risk of death. Furthermore, in-game clues indicate that the Fireflies have been chasing a cure for some time, that there have been others with immunity, and that those immune people captured by the group died, futilely, in these same medical experiments. Ellie would never be allowed a life of peace but would remain a fugitive for the foreseeable future. Therein lies the impossible but moral choice that must be made, yet it is one that is made by Joel, without the player's input. Jason Sheehan's experiences playing through the game on multiple occasions highlights the lack of dissonance between embodied player, character, and narrative. He notes,

> When that ending comes and you are presented with the ultimate parental nightmare scenario: Will you sacrifice the life of your child to save the world? Not a stranger, a friend or even a spouse, but your own daughter (which is what Ellie is now—Joel's daughter, blood or no). Because in Ellie lives the cure to the mushroom zombie plague. But in order to create it, she has to die.
>
> I started a third playthrough before writing this piece. I am walking slow, taking my time, listening to Ellie read from her joke book, watching her swarmed by fireflies on the outskirts of Boston and admiring the natural beauty and deep environmental storytelling of the game. Nature has reclaimed most of this abandoned world, giving us an unusual apocalypse run riot with wildflowers. And while I have not made it to the end yet, I know it's coming. I know the choice I'm going to have to make.
>
> And I know exactly what I'm going to do [n.p.].

Of important note here is his internalized sense of responsibility over the choices in the game and that, in those final tense and bloody moments, no separation exists between digital story and embodied player.

The game concludes with a final exchange between Ellie and Joel, marking his final moral choice this time in regard to Ellie, as they overlook the safety of Jackson County's small, burgeoning survivor's community, one that addresses both their bond now as father and daughter and the burden they agree, tacitly, to share in the aftermath of the events at the hospital. Their exchange is left open to interpretation but also strongly indicates that both Ellie and Joel are complicit in living with Joel's choice to save her. As they flee the Fireflies' hospital by car, a groggy Ellie asks what has happened. Joel tells her that the Fireflies' experiments did not work but also that "there's a whole lot more like you," meaning people with immunity, so she is free of obligation to the Fireflies. He gives her back personal and moral agency. Ellie demands now, at the overlook, seemingly already knowing the answer, "Swear

to me that everything you said about the Fireflies is true," and Joel swears. Ellie studies him closely and responds, "Okay." Neil Druckmann asserts of the ending, "I thought it would be interesting to take that simple word, but the way she (voice actress Ashley Johnston) would play it would have such a different subtext, and people could interpret it in different ways" (Wallace 37). Whether Ellie does or does not believe Joel, she appears to understand why he made his choice. They are family. They protect their own but do not kill maliciously. They try to work with the world as it is, not how they may wish it to be. It is that smallest construction of human community on which the future rests. This sequence, like Marlene's death, was not without its controversy between those gamers who agreed and disagreed with this apparent complicity. That such debates occur underscores the value of the game as a fictive exploration of human morality. That the game itself plays along a set narrative trajectory, allowing the player no options regarding any of these major events, does not lessen the strength or power of the story, or its ability to be fully immersive.

While the horror genre is, regrettably, frequently arguably maligned or ignored within the academy, the careful reader—and in this case, player—finds instead that in the best iterations of the form, horror possesses the powerful ability not only to unearth fear but also to question the realities and morals by which humans build civilizations and mark their days. *Silent Hill 2* (2001), sometimes also subtitled as *Restless Dreams*, serves as the final narrative example for long-form games with little player choice. Even though the game sends the player on an effectively linear path through the nightmarish world of Silent Hill, as areas of the otherwise expansive town are blocked off at various points in the game until the plot progresses such that access becomes necessary, the tension that the narrative builds evokes a consistent sense of dread. In addition, the choices that the player makes throughout the game, and these can be as seemingly innocuous as whether the player instantly heals an injury or allows James, the protagonist, to remain in low health more frequently, ultimately do shift which ending the player will experience. However, since the game contains no major choices and no other real opportunities for expansion, the title remains most logically in this category, rather than the next, which focuses on games with far more overall player agency. In the particular case of *Silent Hill 2*, the player likely has made choices or performed actions without considering any consequences, or even what those consequences may be, given that the game never signals whether any one course of action has led to larger ramifications. It is only on subsequent playthroughs that the player might deliberately try to manipulate the in-game conditions to achieve a particular ending.

Before turning to the specific elements of the narrative features marking *Silent Hill 2* as exemplary of the horror fiction genre, attention must first be

given to its construction of setting and place, both inherent to the experience of digital storytelling. Silent Hill exists in this game, as it does in all other games in the series, in two forms: a "regular" version and an "Otherworld" version, each equally lethal to the player, who embodies a different protagonist in each game. In *Silent Hill 2*, the player embodies James Sunderland, a widower who inexplicably visits Silent Hill after receiving a letter from his dead wife. The game is in the third-person perspective, meaning the in-game camera's default view is above James and just over his shoulder. The player possesses a relatively limited arsenal of weapons with which to dispatch Silent Hill's increasingly dangerous monstrous inhabitants. To counter that, the player very early in the game finds a small, portable radio. The radio emits an unnerving and changing static pattern in response to the player's proximity to monsters. The static grows louder the closer the player gets to a monster, even when the darkness and shadows of Silent Hill hide them from the eye. Worse still, some monsters, like the Mannequins, which have the appearance of a mannequin composed of two sets of legs joined at a torso, do not activate the radio until the player gets within striking distance and the Mannequins move to attack. The environment of Silent Hill creates a situation of constant threat; even the one tool presumably provided to warn the player of dangers contributes to the dread. The game also makes effective use of the digital environment, utilizing, especially, aural clues to disorient the player and to warn him or her of potential danger.

The environment of Silent Hill as a location heightens the nightmarish feel and constant sense of being on edge. The game itself is fairly dark colorwise and many of the textures are muddied, meaning that detail can be hard to determine at a distance. Certainly, some of this can be attributed to the age of the game. It was originally released in 2001 for PlayStation 2.[26] Indeed, the shrouding of Silent Hill in a deep fog in both this title and the other early console releases solved one problem while adding narrative complexity. As Vince Locke argues, "The designers' solution was to use fog to disguise the games' short draw distances and low graphical resolutions … [but] it served a metaphorical one as well" (86). Indeed, the relatively low-resolution nature of the graphics only heightens the horror. For example, in both the normal and Otherworld versions of Silent Hill, much of the environment appears to be covered in a substance that appears sometimes rust-like and sometimes blood-like. The player never knows if he or she is walking into a scene of gore and blood or one simply depicting the deteriorating town, or perhaps a perverse combination of the two. Silent Hill is a place where troubled, desperate people are found, and the city itself changes in both form and in the types of monsters roaming its streets to best fit an individual character's own secret fears or deeds. The city possesses no fixed, unified form. Additionally, the physical appearance of the game's monsters is a constant source of horror,

threat, and grotesquerie. As Bernard Perron argues, "The monsters are 'impure,' thus disgusting … the creatures transgress distinctions such as inside/outside, living/dead, insect/human, flesh/machine, and animate/inanimate" (43). He discusses here the monsters across the *Silent Hill* game series, so not all directly apply to the specific monstrous inhabitants of *Silent Hill 2*, but his overall point proves an important starting position for considering the relationships among Silent Hill, its other denizens, and the embodied player. The Mannequins, referenced earlier, appear as a cruel mockery of the female form. The Lying Figure, the first monster James encounters and must kill, appears to be encased in a straightjacket made of flesh as it careens unsteadily toward the player. Everything in the game, from the environment to physical threats, is always off-kilter or malformed, existing in the same way as many strange, fragmented elements of nightmares and the inner states of the characters themselves.

The human characters populating the game are no less strange, even off-putting, both in deed and in their very presence. The first such character James meets is Angela Orosco, who is alone in a graveyard in a very early portion of the game. When James speaks to her, the game moves to a cut scene, highlighting the strangeness of the encounter as it plays out cinematically. Angela claims, "I'm looking for my mama…. I mean my mother. It's been so long since I've seen her. I thought my father and brother were here, but I can't find them either…. I'm sorry…. It's not your problem." The first part of her line is annunciated strangely. She says "mama" with an exaggerated emphasis on the first syllable, which makes her seem oddly childlike. When she says "mother," she switches to an incongruent formality that also seems inauthentic. Most tellingly out of place are her presence in the town and her assertion that her father and brother were "here." Whether she means in Silent Hill itself or specifically in the graveyard, her statement makes little sense. Silent Hill is all but taken over by monsters, and how Angela would even have made it to Silent Hill remains a mystery. Why her family would be in a graveyard, living or dead, but now seemingly missing makes little sense as well. This odd, illogical, and dreamlike dialogue is portentous of other encounters James will have with the few other human characters inhabiting the town. All appear to be working through Silent Hill as their own personal hell. Angela, the narrative reveals toward the end, was repeatedly raped by her father and brother, and after James helps her to defeat a monstrous version of her father, she remains unable to find peace. The player's last glimpse of Angela shows her walking up a burning staircase—the entire "house," featuring the battle with her father, now engulfed in flames—resigned to continue living in her own nightmare or die in it, should Silent Hill actually allow her to commit suicide. The player becomes a helpless spectator here, watching Angela slowly, painfully, move further up the staircase. Indeed, by

this point, she has been transformed into a sympathetic character. Yet although the player gains a seeming victory by defeating the so-called Abstract Daddy, that victory is undercut by the inability to help Angela.

The totality of the environment of Silent Hill—from the dark, oppressive atmosphere to the unnerving encounters with both monsters and human denizens—forms the backdrop against which an even bleaker and potent narrative emerges, underscoring the inherent relationship in digital narrative between setting, place, and story. That narrative, which starts off-kilter with James returning to Silent Hill, ends on darker psychological ground. Silent Hill as a town, not only in this particular game but also in all of the games in the series, presents psychological manifestations of the things that the characters have done or the things that they fear or both. For Angela, in the previous example, her greatest fear is her father, so he eventually manifests as a horrifying monster, Abstract Daddy, which appears to be a huge, monstrous version of her father merged with a bed. Given his constant raping of her as a child, Angela initially cowers when confronted by it, and it is only via James's intervention that the creature is defeated. As compelling as Angela's story is, James Sunderland serves as the game's protagonist and the player's avatar, so his story is necessarily the most developed and the most chilling as an exploration of depravity, deflection of guilt, and psychological breakdown.

The primary mystery centers on why James would have returned to Silent Hill at all, but especially at the behest of his dead wife, Mary. The letter, a twisted sort of memento mori that he received supposedly from her, is one of the objects permanently in the player's inventory, and it can be accessed at any time. As such, it serves as an important artifact related to the truthfulness and stability of James's account. The careful player—and this book already has emphasized the need for players to be fully engaged with a narrative—will notice that the letter changes over the course of the game, as more and more revelations about James's past emerge. When the player selects the letter early in the game, James says, "That's definitely Mary's name in her own handwriting on the front of the envelope," and the image of the letter has handwriting on it, although the handwriting on the page is illegible, and the player has no reference against which to independently assess this claim. Furthermore, James's need to assert the veracity of this as an artifact from his dead wife—presumably for himself because the game never breaks the fourth wall to directly address the player as a separate entity—casts into doubt his entire reasoning for showing up in Silent Hill. Very near the final sequence of the game, when James has to defeat an unhinged Eddie, a young man who is a sadistic killer, major parts of this portion of the narrative begin to shift. After James kills Eddie, he laments, "Eddie! I … I killed a … a human being…. A human being…. Mary…. Did you really die three years ago?" The insertion

of Mary into this line of thought at this stage leads to two possibilities. The first is that James is upset about having murdered Eddie and thinks of Mary and his grief over her death from cancer. The second, given the word order, is that he confesses to Eddie's corpse about having killed Mary. While it will be the latter that will ultimately be proved true in the game's final chapter, here, it can serve only to trigger the ear of the careful gamer. Moreover, from this point forward, the letter from Mary has changed from having writing on it to being a blank piece of paper. In the context of the game's overall narrative trajectory, one seemingly incidental detail, a letter in the player's inventory, proves to be critical to unraveling James's motives for returning to Silent Hill.

The revelation of Mary's true fate is wrenching. She was dying from terminal cancer when James killed her, smothering her with a pillow. The player watches the smothering on a television in a hotel room, the place where James was going to "meet" Mary. The playback shows James standing over Mary, and then his quick movement to smother her, and then it devolves into a blurrier series of cuts of Mary interspersed with indistinct images of James's killing her. His reasons for the murder are unclear because James once again deflects responsibility and tends to reason that she was suffering. Yet he also admits, "No, that's not the whole truth. You also said that you didn't want to die. The truth is … part of me hated you … for taking away my life." Ewan Kirkland notes, "Silent Hill combines realist and expressionistic aesthetics. The small town location of shuttered storefronts, dingy diners, and faded burger bars provides a detailed if mundane setting for the games' horrific events. As gameplay progresses, this space becomes an increasingly macabre-maze of rotting hotel hallways, corridors strewn with bloody mattresses, dismembered manikins suspended behind caged walls, while retaining grimy verisimilitude throughout" (319). This blending of the real with the unreal, the mundane with the horrific, the living with the dead, feed into this final narrative revelation, James's killing of his sick wife.

The game hints, albeit leaving a sense of ambiguity that this could possibly have been a mercy killing, that James finally murders Mary out of a combination of equally selfish reasons: that Mary's overall sickness and her need of care were irritants, and that her illness left Mary less attractive and sexually unavailable. The evidence that these were James's reasons takes two primary forms, although others exist throughout the densely woven narrative. The first piece of evidence is the sudden appearance of Maria, a woman James meets in Silent Hill who looks exactly like Mary but has a penchant for acting seductively and dressing provocatively, both symbolic of James's distaste for Mary being unable to sexually satisfy him. The second form of evidence is a specific type of monster in the game known as Pyramid Head,[27] an unnaturally large and tall male dressed in stylized butcher's wear. His head is encased in a giant metal pyramid, which seems to cause him pain, given his mannerisms. The

Freudian imagery of Pyramid Head as the ultimate example of the phallic male exists in the form of his weapon, an oversized blade.

The first time that James, and therefore the player, encounters Pyramid Head sets up, when viewed from the end of the game, much of the imagery, symbolism, and narrative clues that follow. James is investigating an abandoned apartment when he hears Pyramid Head. The game switches to a cut scene that finds James hiding, tellingly, in a closet, presumably with all of his rather nasty skeletons. He can only view what happens through the slats in the closet door, creating a heightened sense of claustrophobic terror. The player, though, is allowed to view the cut scene from the third-person perspective of a camera, rather than from the third person, over the shoulder perspective of a character. The player at this point, separated from the game's protagonist, becomes a witness to horror and perhaps has been separated for precisely that reason: to allow the player to start to consider the unreliability of James's narration of events. Pyramid Head appears to be as much of a threat to the other monsters of Silent Hill as he may be to James. The monster enters, dragging and fighting two of the Mannequin creatures mentioned earlier. However, once Pyramid Head gains the upper hand, he also appears to be simulating raping them until he finally dispatches both creatures. During this sequence, the Mannequins emit high-pitched screaming and desperately fight him, kicking with all four of their limbs. Pyramid Head finally dispatches the second one by forcing it to the ground and breaking it. His placement in a position of dominant power proves important here. James attempts to shoot Pyramid Head, but rather than strike back, Pyramid Head merely looks at James through the door before leaving. This is another example of the game's deft use of symbolism and the grotesque. James *is* Pyramid Head, of course, but more complex. James is a monster, capable of killing his own wife. He is sexually immature, seemingly much more concerned with his own satisfaction than with the reality that his wife is slowly and painfully dying. He also clearly fantasizes about and revels in brutalizing women, as evidenced by Pyramid Head's dispatching of the Mannequins. The question of whether anything redemptive exists in James is never clear. Certainly, if Pyramid Head represents James, it also represents some level of inner torment in him, as the monster clutches at his encased head as if in great agony. However, this could be agony stemming from James/Pyramid Head's wanting to be fully free of confines to act however he wants, as much as it could be a sign of guilt. Further, James has to defeat two Pyramid Head monsters toward the end of the game, before proceeding to the game's final monster. Yet this throws in one final complication. James also has to face a monstrous version of Mary, who has merged with her hospital bed. He defeats her, yet that would seem to speak to him justifying his killing of her yet again: she was, indeed, a monstrous woman after all.

The game's multiple endings also hint at James being irredeemable to greater and lesser extents.[28] The player can achieve one of three endings the first time through, depending on the actions taken throughout the game: the "In Water," "Leave," and "Maria" endings. The "Rebirth" ending becomes possible after the game has been completed once. The "In Water" ending has James committing suicide. The sequence begins with Mary in voice-over telling him, "I told you I wanted to die, James." James responds, "That's why I did it, honey. I just couldn't watch you suffer." Yet this seems quite suspect, remarkably self-serving for James as Mary essentially thanks him for killing her. He also turns much of this on himself, again, as he focuses on how *he* could not watch *her* suffer and now chooses to kill himself. The "Leave" ending starts with the same final conversation between James and Mary, but now she encourages him to "Go on with your life," and he seems to escape Silent Hill, again in a self-serving manner that allows him to absolve himself of responsibility for her and her death. This pairs a bit with the "Maria" ending, in which James manages to escape Silent Hill with Maria as well. In the closing part of the "Maria" ending, Maria begins to cough, as Mary did. James angrily comments to her that she needs to "do something" about it. These latter two endings both find James leaving Silent Hill, but both seem to also hint that the darkness within him remains and he quickly turns on Maria when her sexual vitality is threatened. The "Rebirth" ending concludes with James bringing Mary's corpse to a shrine on an island in Silent Hill, with the idea that the old gods will resurrect her. This ending is perhaps the most troubling of all. Now, he has completely taken bodily agency from Mary. Alexander Kriss argues of the "Leave" ending specifically, and all of the endings more generally,

> "Leave" may be the closest James can come to finding the balance between these two points. And it makes sense that this is the easiest ending for us to achieve as players. For all its perversity, *Silent Hill* wants us to thread the needle and find a certain equilibrium, fragile as it may be. Suicide is shocking but final; repeating the past is gloomy but predictable. Moving forward into the unknown, however—taking ownership of our lives while maintaining reverence for that which we do not know and cannot change—that is truly scary [n.p.].

All of these endings bring the main narrative to a logical conclusion and none of them necessarily supersedes the others in terms of which is most "appropriate" as an end to James's story. Instead, all of them leave the player with a sense of unease about this man he or she has embodied over many hours of gameplay. At best, his mercy killing of Mary ended her suffering, although he still clearly benefitted as much from being free of her as she did being delivered from her suffering. At worst, he is still Pyramid Head: a hyper-masculine, petulant and aggressive man who views women as nothing more than objects of lust and who will lash out against them when they fail to satisfy.

The games in this section all require the player to trust in their respective narratives' process of unfolding. While some of them, such as *Silent Hill*, utilize player choice and play styles to influence the game's ending, others, like *BioShock Infinite*, deny the player any chance to reshape the game's story or its bleak ending. They all make the powerful argument, however, that choice need not be a defining point in the success of digital storytelling. While the idea of a choice-based narrative offers the player a certain type of agency, even stories with no choice options at all still, inherently, require the player's active engagement—another form of agency—to unfold. The next section of this chapter considers narratives that are based largely on player choice, such that he or she is in the unique position of shaping and re-shaping the in-game world.

Games with Long-Form Storytelling Involving a High Level of Player Choice

The discussion of long-form games involving a high level of player investment in choices shaping the narrative begins with the issue of in-game identity. In the previous set of examples, the player embodied a specific character, one chosen by the game developers as the narrative's protagonist or anti-hero, and personalization of that character was not a possibility. That is not to argue that only games featuring high levels of player choice allow the player to customize, to some extent, his or her in-game avatar. However, the added option of customizing the player's avatar heightens the overall weight of all choices that factor into developing these choice-centric narratives. Each player, when faced with the task of customizing a character at the start of a video game, has to make some complicated choices related to identity. The first choice that most games will ask of players is about gender. Certainly, many players opt to choose an in-game avatar corresponding to his or her gender identity. However, the player might also choose the opposite gender, perhaps to have the experience of embodying someone completely unlike himself or herself, or perhaps out of the belief that choosing one gender over the other might provide an in-game advantage. For example, perhaps the player opts for a male character, regardless of his or her own gender, because of a belief that the game will imbue that character with greater physical prowess. Although not all games offer the player a range of choices regarding an avatar, these are becoming far more common, and when the narrative is not centered on a specific storyline focused on a specific, unchangeable character, those that do offer avatar options provide an important connection between self, community, and game. Certainly, diversity of characters, across all game types, continues to be critical area for development, given that "the-

oretically, a media environment in which a particular type of person is highly represented will result in a viewer or player who is more likely to recall that type of person rather than a different type of person" (Williams 819). Whereas white male characters had tended to dominate game narratives, thus reifying in negative ways the concept of patriarchy, very recent game trends show developers expanding beyond these limits. Modern gamers therefore have at their disposal nuanced options for avatar customization, allowing for higher level of identity between them and their embodied characters.

Some games, such as *Skyrim*, also allow the player to customize the character's race. In the case of *Skyrim*, each racial option comes with an initial description containing the positives and negatives, broadly defined, of each choice. For example, the elven Altmers are very adept at magic and come with statistic (stat) bonuses related to this skill. The Nords, a human race, have greater physical prowess, making them suitable for players wanting a warrior instead of a mage. The player, then, already begins to shape the narrative by the nature of the type of character he or she selects because the game's combat will prove different depending on specific aptitudes. In addition, the races do not all get along with one another, and this also shapes the player's interactions with the in-game world. As an example, the Nords mistrust the Altmer and the Altmer believe themselves superior to all other races. After choices related to race, many games, *Skyrim* included, allow the player to make exacting choices as to physical appearance. In some cases, this can include making subtle changes to underlying bone structure or adjusting eye height, lip width, and skin tone, just as a start. In other games, such as *Fallout 4*, the player cannot choose a non-human race, but can instead select either male and female characters across a diversity of race. While the player's ability to construct an avatar to his or her own choosing heightens the player's connection to that avatar, it should not be construed that this ability heightens the overall impact of that game's narrative. Miroslaw Filiciak delves into the issues of gaming, identity, and choice. On the issue of choice in video games, probably most especially in games where characters can choose to be good or evil, he asserts that "it is easier to identify ourselves with something that is partly created by us than with pictures imposed on us by somebody else" (91). While this certainly has merit, choice alone in terms of the physical appearance of the player's in-game avatar does not account for the level of investment the player has in the character embodied in the game. As the examples in the previous category demonstrate, the player easily becomes fully invested or immersed in a game like *BioShock Infinite*, played from the first-person view as Booker DeWitt, or like *The Last of Us*, played in the third-person, over the shoulder perspective almost exclusively as Joel, without either of these games offering the players any choice at all regarding the embodied self or the appearance of either protagonist.

Selection of an in-game self provides a compelling starting point in a discussion about choice-based narratives. However, the player's avatar is only one relatively small aspect of a digital story spanning myriad hours of play. What may prove to be an even more fascinating line of investigation lies in those games such as the *Mass Effect* series that allow the player to shape the in-game world and narrative based on how he or she interacts with others. In cases like these, the player cannot easily deflect responsibility for the way the narrative unfolds. He or she directly influences how that happens and to what end. Furthermore, these choices enact permanent change on the narrative. The *Mass Effect* series currently spans three games and is a massive science fiction epic involving dozens of hours of play.[29] Considering that the total potential play time, consisting of a complicated and thoughtfully presented main narrative exploring the cyclical nature of war, numerous side questions, and several story-based DLC modules, the game series provides any digital storytelling scholar ample room for investigation. As Marino Carvalho argues, "Given the richness of its lore and its plurality of characters, side quests, and points of interest, it would seem almost facile to reduce its plethora of 'histories' to a single underlying logic" (131). The *Mass Effect* series explores a number of overarching philosophical questions, such as the nature of what it means to be valued as a sentient being, while also focusing heavily on the player's own moral choices within that framework. As Marie-Laure Ryan asserts regarding the study of text through the lens of narratology, "Whether the main narrative tense is the present or the past, the reader lives this narrated time as a moving present and becomes in imagination a witness of the events" (124). Her words are also relevant to digital stories, although she specifically applies them in this example to written text. In the case of the *Mass Effect* series, the high levels of player engagement and choice, both of which shape the in-game world, allow the player to experience this sense of witnessing events, yet it also places the gamer in the role of creator. Video games with high levels of choice, then, present a complex relationship between game developers, story, and players. On the one hand, the "text" of the game is created once the game is finished and shipped to players, and no game is without some sense of narrative boundaries. Yet within those boundaries, a player navigating a high-choice narrative becomes, in a sense, a co-creator, shaping meaning in a manner particular to that player's decisions. Even two hypothetical players who make identical decisions all the way through a game like *Mass Effect* would not necessarily have done so for the precise same reasons.

Choice begins in *Mass Effect* with the player determining the appearance of his or her Shepherd avatar. The game offers two "prebuilt" versions, a male named John and a female named Jane. The player can opt to customize the character, allowing for a great variety in appearance and race. However,

although the game boasts an intergalactic cast of fully developed alien species, Shepherd must be human given the specific narrative that unfolds. The player also selects from one of three backstories for Shepherd, each of which yields a specific quest in the game related to that history, a psychological predisposition, and a military specialization, as Shepherd is a member of N7, a special operations-like unit within the Systems Alliance's military system. This is a complex set of starting choices, and all of these selections have direct relevance to the game's narrative. Shepherd's gender dictates possible romantic interests, both heterosexual and homosexual, in the game. Some characters are interested only in a heterosexual Shepherd, some only in a homosexual version, while others are potential love interests in both cases.[30] The choice of psychological predisposition starts the player with a certain number of points added to either the Paragon or Renegade personality options.

The Paragon/Renegade paradigm provides a constant reminder to the player of the choices he or she has made throughout the game, and the options are enacted along a sliding scale, meaning that the game eschews a situation where the character has the option to be only fully good or fully evil. The choice system also prevents a zero-sum game, wherein one particular choice on its own has the power to drastically sway Shepherd's moral standing. Instead the Shepherd embodied by the player can run the gamut between a more morally upright person and a more corrupt one. As the sliding scale begins to move more toward one pole over the other, in-game changes begin to occur. For example, a Shepherd who is closer to the Paragon end of the scale will be given the option to de-escalate conflicts without resorting to violence. A Shepherd who is closer to being a Renegade will have the option to intimidate others through physical violence. Both major non-player characters and minor characters react in markedly different ways to Shepherd, depending on where Shepard lies on that scale. Because the individual permutations of how this plays out prove too numerous to discuss at length, suffice it to say that the game focuses on Shepherd's leading by example. If Shepherd is prone to violence, aggression, and cynicism, the crew begins to act that way as well, including lacking cohesion with one another. If Shepherd is more thoughtful and measured, especially in the application of violence, the crew will be more trusting of their commander, thereby creating a more cohesive, effective team.

Andy Boyan, Matthew Grizzard, and Nicholas David Bowman comment, "The novel portion of players' choices impacting the story were especially poignant over the long periods of time that occurred between the release dates of the multiple games in the series. The various plots and subplots branch and connect characters from game to game within the series, and the interactions one has with those characters later in the game series depends on how the player acted towards them in previous interactions" (42). They

conducted a study to determine how players reacted toward the issue of choice as presented in the game, and their evidence led them to conclude, "Results of the current study suggest that: most players, even when given the opportunity to behave immorally, choose to engage in moral virtual behaviors; and real-world moral values predict the extent to which players engage in immoral/moral virtual behavior" (49). Their conclusions provide a fascinating insight into the overall idea of embodied self in video games, where players can arguably choose to act in morally reprehensible ways when the opportunity arises without having to face real-world consequences. Instead, the researchers found that players not only were especially keen to experience how their choices played out over the course of the three-game arc but also tried to emulate in-game the types of people they believe themselves to be in real life. While digital storytelling, then, provides an opportunity to explore a wildly different life, even one marked by depravity, cruelty, or violence, players often do not seek out such possibilities.

The intersection of player choice and player personality in determining the selections Shepherd makes proves fascinating. Torben Grodal asserts, "the subjective experience of nonlinear choice is strongly enhanced by the repetitive nature of games that allow different lines of actions in different playings of the same game, contrary to film, which chooses one line of action and one narrative out of the virtual options" (153). There are no means possible in video game studies to truly pinpoint and define in a manner that would hold true in all circumstances an "ideal" player. Specifically, with regard to video games in which choice scaffolds large portions of the narrative, the challenge lies in considering the sort of player involved when analyzing the potential choices and their outcomes. Without trying to be too simplistically reductive, perhaps the best option in this context is to consider an ideal player as one who chooses as he or she may do in real life, which falls in line with the results found in Boyan, Grizzard, and Bowman's study. This stands in contrast, for example, to a player who deliberately goes into a game wanting to be either perfectly good or perfectly evil. Given that destructive choices are negatively rewarded with an increasingly fractured crew in *Mass Effect*, the gamer who intends to be as much of a renegade as is possible actually ends up working against the larger intent of the narrative, in the same way that extremely anti-social behavior would create chaos in real life. A player who constantly saves his or her game, makes one choice, reloads, then makes another choice may also be set aside as less than ideal for this discussion and analysis. Although there is nothing wrong with this approach, two problems emerge. The first is that, at least with *Mass Effect*, the full ramifications of some choices would not be evident just by undoing one choice. The narrative tries, in many ways, to emulate the complexity of how choices function over time in real life. The second problem is that the player is, in a very real sense,

gaming the system by trying to predict how the narrative might be shaped. In addition, gamers often revisit a game, either in whole or in part, simply for the sense of narrative completion found in finishing all possible branches of the story. For these reasons, the player who approaches choice-based digital narratives in the way he or she may in real life proves the best of the possibilities.

The one complication lies in the difference between the actual self and the idealized self. The player may be making selections based on what he or she would like to believe would be done in real life, but, at least in this case, the player is opting in accordance with a sense of being an embodied self in the game. Zach Waggoner argues, "One of the biggest distinctions between modern and postmodern conceptions of identity is the debate over whether or not the self is unitary or multiple" (24), which intersects perfectly with this idea. The notion that only one permanent and fixed self exists is on shakier ground, perhaps, when digital narratives are considered. The immediacy of choices within a game are such that they are influenced, as they would be in real life, by a person's particular mood or frame of mind at that moment. Because games like *Mass Effect* take many hours to complete, the player is returning to that narrative on multiple occasions and thus in different mindsets during these different gaming sessions. However, even though this may lead to some variance in choice, meaning, for example, a player who is staunchly Paragon has a terrible day and plays a session leaning toward Renegade, his or her narrative will still fall in line with the overriding personality. Moreover, such a permeability of the Renegade/Paragon system mirrors real life experience, wherein everyone can have a bad day or display an outburst of rage or take out frustration on someone who did not deserve it without having these isolated incidents turn them into pariahs or outcasts.

Mass Effect 2 offers players a further, more tangible sense of weight regarding the choices they are making, one dealing directly with the idea of the embodied self in the game. At the start of the game, Shepherd dies during an attack on the Normandy. His body is recovered by the secretive group Cerberus, who manage to resurrect him with a combination of advanced medical technology and a liberal use of cybernetic technology. When Shepherd reawakens two years later, he or she awakes to a face laced with angry red scars due to these procedures. If the player decides to take Shepherd down the Renegade path, the scars worsen over time and refuse to heal. The resulting Shepherd's appearance is certainly off-putting. If the player opts to go the Paragon route, or at least avoids moving heavily into the Renegade side, the scars heal over time and at nearly full Paragon ranking, become all but invisible. A key issue here lies in considering how Shepherd's physical appearance may or may not influence the player over the course of the game. The changes to the scarring may be so subtle that the player may not realize that the movement toward

Renegade or Paragon is the causal factor. The player has the potential to shift behavior at any point in the game, meaning the player is never locked into acting in a particular fashion once he or she has started down a particular path. However, depending upon the point in the game at which the player wants to make a radical shift in Shepherd's behavior, there may not be enough narrative choice left to generate a large impact in the player's overall Paragon /Renegade standing. The issue of player choice and agency combined with measurable outcomes within a narrative provides a complex and detailed subject for investigation and involves complex questions of how players interpret themselves as characters embodied within a game. Christopher Bartel makes a compelling point about the issue of player action more generally when he argues, "The unwilling player feels an uncomfortable sense of conflict—player is carried along by the tide of the deterministic game, unable to genuinely choose to act otherwise. But her freedom to will provides her with a sense of detachment from the actions that her player-character is required to commit" (291). In games like *BioShock Infinite*, for example, the player primarily plays along a pre-set narrative. Although the player can technically avoid some conflict, most of the bloodshed is completely unavoidable, and the player must often "clear" an area of enemies before being able to move to the next. In that sense, the player can disengage from the narrative by the rationalization that he or she is not making an active choice—the game developers are. It stands to reason, though, that even though the player can at some level shift the level of responsibility from himself or herself to the arc of the story, the player is still responsible for manipulating the controls. Every character who dies on the screen still dies as a result of the player using a gun, or a melee weapon, or performing some other action that ends in death. Although it functions on a more intense level with games like *Mass Effect*, in which the player must opt—must choose—in a number of matters from the trivial to the vastly important, the overall ability of digital narratives to involve, indict even, the player in actions unfolding within the story is an important feature.

The intersection of player choice and varied narrative outcomes joins with striking finality in the final mission of *Mass Effect 2*. In this mission, dubbed the "Suicide Mission" by the characters within the game, a lack of loyalty on the part of Shepherd's team members can lead to everyone dying at the end of the second game, including Shepherd.[31] It takes a great deal of player effort, so to speak, to actually wind up with all party members and Shepherd dead. The in-game condition required for Shepherd's death is the death of all other team members, so to achieve that end, the player must set up narrative conditions such that no one on his or her own team has any trust or faith in Shepherd as a leader. Prior to the Suicide Mission, the player as Shepherd has the opportunity to assemble a team in the continuing quest

to defeat the Reapers, in this case by destroying a base held by their proxies, the Collectors. Each member of the team eventually has a "loyalty" side quest available for completion. These missions run the gamut in terms of content, but all reveal far more about the personal histories of the team and that each character trusts Shepherd when Shepherd invests in them. Successful completion of these loyalty side quests is the first step needed to ensure the character's survival. The next factor relates to which tasks the player assigns to the team during the suicide mission. For example, a defense team composed of the strongest and loyal members will survive, whereas a party of either non-loyal or weak members may incur casualties. While this may seem like a minor point, it dovetails perfectly with the purpose of the loyalty missions. The player has to have paid attention to each character's major skills and competencies so that he or she places them in positions that allow them an optimal chance not only to succeed at their tasks but also to survive. For example, the larger team entering the Collector base eventually must split into two separate teams. The player maintains control of Shepherd and one team, but the second team is completely out of the player's control, emphasizing the importance of wise choices. Although a number of characters are available to the player, the most logical choices for the secondary team leader are Garrus or Miranda, both of whom possess leadership qualities and superior martial skills. If the player considered only one of those two traits, the chosen leader may not be competent enough in that role to allow for the secondary team's survival. Finally, the player can choose to upgrade Shepherd's spaceship, the Normandy. Performing as many upgrades as are available again helps strengthen the odds of the team's survival.[32] The game effectively steers the player into the role of having to consider, via Shepherd, the characteristics of strong leadership and the lives of a large squad, rather than just the player's own character. The game does not privilege brute strength and reckless action, but rather careful strategy and planning.

The next point of analysis concerning choice in the *Mass Effect* series examines one of the more profound choices in the game, one that becomes a part of the main narrative thread, has implications as far ranging as the shape of the final battle against the Reapers in *Mass Effect 3*, and forces the player to select a course of action in a situation in which all options are flawed. The game series contains a number of alien races, each of which possesses an in-depth history and complex series of relationships with the other races. A warlike race, the Krogan, had been unnaturally "accelerated" by the Salarians, who gave them technology similar to nuclear weapons before they were ready to help other races in a previous galactic war against the Rachni. Marino Carvalho explores this issue in-depth, noting in part, "Still, the outcomes of Krogan history show that the depiction of progress in *Mass Effect* is far from utopic. The game's lore demonstrates that there are specific levels of development

within which technological advancement is safe" (132). The Krogan were given technology and all the weapons they could dream of, including nuclear weapons, with none of the guidance or counsel that would have allowed them to utilize the weapons peacefully. Indeed, all that was wanted was for the Krogan to fight.

In terms of placing this event into the larger narrative thread of the series proper, the Rachni Wars ended approximately 1,800 years before the events of the first *Mass Effect*. Once their usefulness to the other races had come to an end, the Krogan were both expendable and self-destructive. This ties back to Carvalho's assertion that the game's narrative cautions against the proliferation of technology without heed of morality or consequences. The Salarian interference in Krogan development devastated the latter species for all the many centuries after the end of the Rachni Wars. Their propensity toward violence having been capitalized on when they were uplifted, the Krogan never had the proper opportunity to develop morally and culturally. Instead, they were handed weapons of mass destruction and encouraged to use them wantonly. Consequently, they continue to act as they have been cultivated to act: make war on everyone else. Unfortunately for the survivors of the Rachni war, this now means them, as the Krogan turn their eyes toward conquering the other races. To stop the Krogan from taking over the universe, the Salarians create a genophage, a biological weapon that causes most Krogan to be stillborn. The Salarians, arrogant in their sense of scientific and intellectual superiority over the Krogan and perhaps most other races, feel that they are within their moral right to cull a race of undesirable creatures. While it is ultimately the Turians, another race fearing the Krogan's military might, who release the genophage, the Salarians shoulder the blame for creating the biological weapon to begin with. Although they claim that they did not intend the genophage to work quite in the way that it did, the damage was done, and they do not seem eager to either cure or ameliorate its effects. Instead, they duck responsibility and claim that what happened could not have been foreseen, but should not be undone. The game comments here on issues of both racial superiority and colonization as it plays out globally. Attempts by any number of major powers to conquer lands and subdue indigenous peoples follow the same argument used by the Salarians: because they can do something and are in a superior opposition to do so, they are completely justified. The Krogan are deemed no more than a primitive "subspecies." When the consequences of the colonizers' actions continue to destabilize the subdued race after liberation, the colonizers decry responsibility and blame that race for creating their own misery.

The Salarians, and indeed the other major races who were also threatened by the Krogan, seem to have no compunction about the release of the genophage, and it is in the *Mass Effect* series' own time line, many centuries

later, that anyone is bothered enough to try to cultivate a cure. By the events of the first *Mass Effect* game, the Krogan are moving toward extinction. Their home world, Tuchanka, lies pitted and in ruins, while the Krogan are fragmented into different tribes with no sense of a future and no powerful leader to unite them. The player is given the opportunity from the first game to understand the Krogan as more than just the stereotypes he or she otherwise learns from various NPCs in the character of the Krogan Urdnot Wrex. Wrex is an optional team member for Shepherd and has the potential to survive to the end of the third game. The more often that the player includes Wrex as one of the two party members that he or she is allowed at most points of the game, the more Wrex emerges as a complex being. Certainly, he enjoys bloodshed and is unrepentant about it. Yet he also boasts a mischievous sense of humor and a poignant sense of the plight of his people. For example, he comments in response to another character's less-than-positive reaction to a monument to the Krogan people, "At least you still live. In another two hundred years, this statue may be the only evidence my people ever existed." If Wrex survives to the third game, and if the player chooses to cure the genophage problem, a complex choice that will be discussed in more detail shortly, Wrex will unite all of the Krogan and serve as their first true leader in centuries.[33]

However, that positive outcome cannot occur without the player making a series of complex choices, beginning in *Mass Effect 2*, that slowly culminate in the chance to cure the genophage. In that game, the player learns that the Salarian Mordin, an eccentric and brilliant member of the team, feels increasing guilt and remorse for his continuing research into the genophage, and he wants to rescue his apprentice, Maelon, who had been kidnapped by the Krogan to work on a cure. The player has the option to either keep or destroy Maelon's data on the cure after completing this rescue quest line. In the third game, if the data were saved, the player can opt to cure the genophage problem. The game developers do not make this choice easy. At this point in the narrative, all-out war with the Reapers looms near, and without the entire galaxy united against them, the likelihood of anyone surviving looks bleak. The Salarians are an important ally in the war in the third game and do not want Shepherd to cure the genophage, presumably because that will force them to answer for their actions after centuries of passivity. They go as far as threatening to withdraw their martial support, an action that is infantile, but highlights the Salarians' very real fear at what the Krogan may do in retribution for the genophage. The player has also seen that although the Krogan are capable of thoughtfulness, they are prone to destroying themselves, as evidenced by the nuclear wasteland that is Tuchanka.

The player cannot know whether inactivating the genophage may spectacularly backfire; yet he or she is also faced with knowing the cruelty the Krogan have endured. Moreover, the longer that the player may have spent

in the company of Wrex, the more likely he or she will be swayed by his character, as opposed to simply buying into the racist views of the Krogan. So the player's choice is one part moral and one part strategic. The player can opt to cure the genophage problem, alienating the Salarians but creating a stronger ally in the Krogan; not cure the genophage problem, which maintains the status quo; or *pretend* to cure the genophage problem, which would satisfy the Salarians and trick the Krogan for at least the immediate future. To add one further complication, one that the player likely does not predict in advance, inactivating the genophage results in the death of Mordin, who alone possesses the knowledge to overcome the sabotage intended to prevent its dispersal.[34] Mordin's death allows for the character to have a moment of redemption, while also saving the Krogan from extinction. Gérard Genette's thoughts on narration within a story prove to be relevant here (10). He asks the reader to consider two interrelated questions: the question "*who is the character whose point of view orients the narrative perspective*?" and the very different question "*who is the narrator*?" In the particular case of this example, Genette's ideas orient a study of this particular scene—the curing of the genophage problem and the death of Mordin—in an even more complex light than the weight of the choice itself. The *Mass Effect* series is presented from the point of view of the player embodying Shepherd, yet the larger narrative, especially during the cut scenes that do not directly involve Shepherd, is in third-person narration, a cinematic eye that takes the player to places he or she is not and provides additional information and context. The narrative perspective is oriented through Shepherd for the most part, but so much of what happens in the game occurs due to direct player choice. In that sense, the player conducts a series of events such that Mordin, in the case in which the genophage problem is cured, travels alone to the top of the Shroud to disperse the cure. The third-person narration then completes the scene, with the player observing Mordin's final moments. As the Shroud begins to explode and crumble around him, Mordin has one final private moment, one that reflects on him personally because Shepherd is not present to witness it, but the player is. Depending on an optional event in *Mass Effect 2*, Mordin either comments on the rightness of his actions or starts to sing his version of "A Scientist Salarian," essentially a Salarian rip-off of "I Am the Very Model of a Modern Major General." The player has been both the catalyst in setting up a series of circumstances by which Mordin's story concludes and the witness to Mordin's death via a narrated event.

The issue of DLC as it both expands and contributes to a digital narrative warrants attention with regard to *Mass Effect*, already sprawling in its main narrative but made even more so through the release of numerous DLC modules, some containing brief additional missions and others far more ambitious and sprawling. The DLC storytelling module that adds to the depth of char-

acter development is the "Shore Leave" addition to *Mass Effect 3*. The DLC is divided into two main narrative pieces, a mission involving a clone of the protagonist, Shepherd, and a segment consisting of Shepherd throwing a huge party to allow the team to bond and to relax after the mission. This party proves to be a fascinating narrative choice in that it allows the player an opportunity to see the characters who have been on his or her team for many hours of gameplay function within an entirely different environment. As the player interacts with various groups of partygoers, some argue over their philosophical differences, some explore tentative new romances, and others become spectacularly drunk. While none of this is necessary to the game proper, it underscores that digital storytelling offers the flexibility, through the release of DLC, to add in both large and small ways to the verisimilitude of the story worlds and to the roundness of the characters inhabiting them. Much of the narrative in *Mass Effect 3* is bleak, as has been the case with the overall narrative arc. Although individual segments or moments provide levity, the overall tone focuses on weighty issues related to war, politics, and morality. "Shore Leave" allows the player embodying Shepherd to bond with his or her shipmates in the run-up to the final confrontation with the Reapers. The storytelling in this DLC happens in small moments over the course of one evening, making the larger game richer for it.

Persona 4: Golden[35] lacks the extent of narrative choice found in the *Mass Effect* series in terms of choices directly impacting the narrative on both micro and macro levels. However, it does offer a unique take on player agency and choice culminating in one of seven possible endings, including one considered to be the "true" ending, and an entire mechanism of choice based on social interaction and relationship building within the game. Both of these systems of choice, while separate in terms of how they function within the overarching narrative, together seek to involve the player in the story in unique ways. The game straddles the genre line between the visual novel, which will be more fully explored later in the book, and a dungeon crawler-style game, marked by exploration of procedurally generated levels, meaning that they change each time the player re-enters them. The plot of the game involves the existence of an alternate dimension, accessed through televisions. When someone from the real world, the setting here being modern-day Japan, in the fictional small town of Inaba[36] is kidnapped and brought into the TV world, his or her "Persona" emerges. The Persona exists as the repressed parts of the self the person refuses to acknowledge but must accept to be able to escape. For each of the main story characters who becomes trapped in the TV world, the Persona takes a different form, so the game offers a wide narrative variety on the traits people might rather keep hidden than acknowledge. The game therefore deals with the idea of a unified self in a complex manner, eschewing an easy scenario wherein the characters "overcome" the darker

aspects of their personalities and instead asking the player to consider that one's entire identity must be embraced. The narrative also focuses on a cast of high school students, both male and female with various sexual and gender identities, who are learning more about themselves under the microscope and stress of high school life in Japan.[37] It is the narrative's treatment of those relationships and the choices the player must make regarding them that provide an intriguing line of narrative analysis.

The player embodies a high school aged male character named Yu Narukami. Although this is a specific character who cannot be personalized, his very name hints at what becomes most important about the game and the player's central role in what unfolds, reflexively focusing the narrative back on the player with the homonym "you." James Paul Gee considers that video games "situate meaning in a multimodal space through embodied experiences to solve problems and reflect on the intricacies of the design of imagined worlds and the design of both real and imagined social relationships and identities in the modern world" (48). As the narrative develops, the player must choose how to interact with other characters within the world, learning along the way how to build—or damage—relationships with others. This includes the possibility of a romantic relationship, but that provides only one possible exploration of relationship building. The game offers many smaller opportunities to connect with others in Inaba, even when they are not otherwise directly related to the main narrative. One of the game's most important aspects lies in its building of social connections. In addition to the game's core group of seven other characters who can join Yu as active party members, the game also features a number of supporting and ancillary characters with whom Yu can form bonds. Forging these bonds provides two primary rewards within the game. The first allows the player to strengthen those Personas that Yu battles against, demons known as "Shadows" in the TV world. Each main character has a Persona that functions as an alter ego. However, Yu can wield additional Personas not associated with these other characters. Each Persona is in an overall category, such as "death" or "priestess," that increases in level as bonds with characters associated with that category increase. The second primary award allows for the main party characters to "max out" their own Personas. At that point, the Persona evolves into a more advanced and more powerful form, thus further aiding the player in battle. However, it is impossible to max out everyone's social links because the game strictly allocates Yu's in-game time. Except for official breaks, a large part of Yu's day is spent at school. Time before school is not usually left to the player's choice; Yu might meet with another character, but these are not scenes that increase social bonds. Thus, players are generally limited in their attempts to increase social bonds to the time during lunch, after school, and in the evening and must prioritize accordingly. In addition, social bonds do not automatically

increase by one level every time the player opts to spend time with a given character, preventing a character from quickly maxing out bonds one at a time. Bonds are forged over a long in-game investment in each of these characters and their personal lives, and the narrative unfolds pieces of their stories one small bit at a time, mimicking the manner in which two friends might get to know each other better over time.

However, to complicate matters, the player has other options for time allocation that do not involve raising social bonds with the main characters in the game, but provide other advantages or social opportunities that round out the narrative's immersion of the player. Yu can also choose to work to earn more in-game money after school or in the evening. This allows him the chance to form social bonds with ancillary characters. An example of this involves Yu taking a night janitorial job at a hospital. His immediate supervisor, Sayoko Uehara, at first seems to be very shallow. However, as the social bond develops, the player learns that Sayoko struggles with the reality that many of her patients ultimately die. As the social bond strengthens, she slowly reveals that she originally became a nurse because she genuinely wanted to help others and had perhaps started to lose sight of that. If the player maxes out her social link, Sayoko leaves Inaba, but goes on to volunteer as a nurse helping out in emerging countries. Bit by bit, because of the player's decision to invest in this relationship, her story evolves over time and eventually comes to a resolution. Yu can also participate in after-school clubs, which again put the player into contact with ancillary characters whose social links can be advanced over time. These last choices further serve to add a sense of verisimilitude to the story. While one aspect of it—that related to the Shadows and the TV world—lies in the realm of fantasy, the other—the daily life of a high school student in Japan—is handled with great care and an eye toward realism, including the player's ability to participate in a variety of activities and clubs.

Finally, Yu can pursue a romance with one of eight female characters in the game as a means of rounding out the social life of a teenager in more authentic ways. As will be considered shortly, the game does explore homosexuality and gender identity in thoughtful ways. However, Yu himself does not have the option to pursue a homosexual relationship, curtailing the narrative's ability to explore awakening sexuality more completely. One such possible love interest is Yukiko, who begins the game as very reserved and duty-bound to help her parents run their inn and hot spring.[38] Regardless of whether the player chooses to pursue this particular relationship, he or she still has to save Yukiko from the TV world and help her defeat her Persona. In this case, Yukiko's Persona takes the form of a large caged bird, signifying her sense of feeling trapped by the weight of her responsibility at the inn. As the relationship between Yu and Yukiko develops, she reveals her anger at

the prospect of a life in which she feels trapped in Inaba, yet also duty-bound not to abandon her parents' business to pursue her own dreams. Ultimately, Yukiko works through her feelings and concludes that she will stay in Inaba, but on her own terms. Because she has made the decision fully, she finds a sense of peace and renewed pride in her family's business. While this proves to be just one of many romance opportunities the player may pursue, it underscores the emphasis of *Persona 4* on investing in social relationships with characters to learn more about them. The game mimics real life in that characters do not simply divulge their entire histories to Yu for expediency or story. Instead, the player must decide whose stories to move forward, and as a trade-off, some storylines will not be completed, at least not on the first playthrough. Jonathan Gottschall argues that storytelling allows for a safe vantage point from which to experience situations that would otherwise prove dangerous, if not lethal, when he notes, "Just as flight simulators allow pilots to train safely, stories safely train us for the big challenges of the social world. Like a flight simulator, fiction projects us into intense simulations of problems that run parallel to those we face in reality. And like a flight simulator, the main virtue of fiction is that we have a rich experience and don't die at the end" (58). The complex and interwoven series of interlocking social relationships in *Personal* 4 work as just this type of simulator. While the game does an admirable job of allowing the player to forge deeper relationships with many characters, it unevenly explores more complex issues related to gender and sexuality.

Kanji Tatsumi, a major character, merits further analysis due to how the story depicts his struggle with his sexuality. The narrative itself proves to be somewhat vague in terms of definitively defining Kanji as gay. However, attitudes differ between Japanese and American players in terms of whether or not the true source of Kanji's conflict is related to his being closeted or his feelings of being an outsider in general. The perspectives of Yu Namba, the game's project lead, and Nick Maragos, the game editor, showcase the overall differences in perception. Both men work for Atlus's USA division and worked on the American localization of the game. Namba says of Kanji, "We would like everyone to play through the game and come up with their own answers to that question; there is no official answer. What matters is that Kanji's other self cries out, 'Accept me for who I am!' I think it's a powerful message which many, if not all of us can relate to." Maragos asserts, "At the end of Kanji's Social Link, should you choose to advance it that far, he does say specifically in reference to his Shadow self, 'That "other me" is me'" (both qtd. in Xu n.p.). Certainly, the issue of ambiguity is not unique to digital storytelling, and a number of texts avoid providing concrete certainty to readers or viewers. However, as Maragos counters, the player who invests fully in Kanji's social link appears to get a fairly definitive comment from Kanji about

his sexuality. In his book studying homosexuality in modern day Japan, author Mark McLelland focuses on the depiction of men in comic books targeted toward women and the real-life "teen idols" who emulate them. He writes, "It could be argued that these boys have styled themselves to look like the beautiful boys ubiquitous in women's comics" (42), and it is this precise idea that terrifies Kanji. He does not want to be seen as less than masculine, yet he cannot reconcile culturally his sexuality, coupled with his interest in some traditionally feminine hobbies, such as making dolls. McLelland also interviewed a number of gay Japanese men and discovered that, "it was not these men's same-sex attraction which was being stigmatized, but their failure to perform masculine gender" (192). Taken together, these two facets of homosexuality in modern Japan seem almost incompatible. On the one hand, very effeminate gay men are the ubiquitous characters in comics marketed to women. On the other hand, gay men who are not otherwise fictionalized or occupying the strange space of being teen idols are still expected to be traditionally masculine. It is into this quagmire that Kanji wades. At the start of the game, Kanji appears to be a stereotypical tough guy—a punk even—who uses threats of physical force and intimidation with alarming regularity. Rumors circle that Kanji is also a terrible bully, an accusation Yu learns is without merit, but which serves Kanji's purpose of keeping others at bay for fear that they will shun him when they get to know who he really is. It is only when two related events begin to unfold that the player sees more in-depth character emerge.

The first event relates to a powerful attraction Kanji has to another character, Naoto Shirogane, whose more problematical in-game issue of gender identity will be explored as well. Importantly, Kanji believes that Naoto is male and is romantically interested in him. At one point, a very nervous and pensive Kanji waits to meet with Naoto, and from the context, it is clear that he considers this to be a date, or at the very least a precursor to a possible romantic involvement. That he would appear to be willing to meet another male for a date, however deeply closeted Kanji is, speaks to his intended identity in the game as gay. As the player embodying Yu uncovers more of Kanji's backstory, Kanji declares, "So from now on I got two rules: Rule one! Be myself. Rule two! Get people to understand me." From that point on, Kanji does appear more willing to drop his normal "tough guy" routine, and he openly shares his hobby of making stuffed animals. However, aside from the more overt instance with Naoto, Kanji does not otherwise romantically pursue men, but he also does not pursue relationships with women.

The second event relates to Kanji's abduction into the TV world and the resulting confrontation that he and the team have with his Persona. Kanji's Persona manifests, to an absurd degree, all of Kanji's fears about being outed as gay, combined with his not fully accepting his own sexuality. Each character's

Persona exists in an environment reflecting that person's inner turmoil. In the case of Yukiko, as mentioned earlier, her Persona exists in an environment that looks like a fairy tale castle, a manifestation of how Yukiko feels trapped and wants "Prince Charming" to rescue her. For Kanji, his Persona dwells in a world modeled after a Japanese bathhouse, with the abducted Kanji wearing almost no clothing and acting hyperbolically and stereotypically gay. For example, Kanji no longer speaks in his normal deep voice but in a higher register and with a lisp. It would be easy to immediately dismiss the game as simply pandering to gay stereotypes. However, it is not quite as simple as that. The key lies in the TV world's bringing to light the very deeply repressed feeling and fears of the abductee: it reveals them forcefully, but it does not create them. In this particular instance, Kanji deals both with his sexuality and his fear about how he would be perceived as a gay male. It would be natural, given his insecurities, that he would fear others seeing him as emasculated or effeminate. As Yu and his friends get closer to confronting Kanji's Persona, one of them, Teddie, comments, "That was his other self. It's trying to reveal his hidden feelings…. It seems much worse than that time with Yuki-Chan's Shadow," an important set of observations that focuses on the complexity of Kanji's inner conflict. Yukiko's Persona reveals that she is deeply unhappy with her life and duties, which are certainly revelations that she wants to keep hidden. However, the potential fallout for Kanji and his fears concerning that fallout contain a deeper sense of pathos. He is not just holding back feelings that would be potentially hurtful to others, such as Yukiko does for her parents. He is wrestling as a high school student not only with his sexual identity, but also with his fears about not being perceived as outwardly masculine. The physical appearance of Kanji's Persona confirms this: it is a giant creature, with Kanji's head, upper body, and arms at the top surrounded by a wide wreath of roses. The rest of its body is hyper-masculine, with exaggerated musculature, and in each of its second set of hands, the creature clutches the symbol of a male, a circle with an arrow pointing at a diagonal from the upper right segment. Before the Shadow can truly be defeated, Kanji must accept it, which he finally does with the words, "You're me … and I'm you, dammit!" Although Kanji does not otherwise make overt mention of his sexuality for the remainder of the game, the narrative seems to privilege an interpretation of Kanji as homosexual.

Naoto's storyline, which initially dovetails closely with Kanji's, proves more problematical in how the narrative works through her gender identity and opens meaningful considerations around the inclusion of transgendered characters in digital narrative. Naoto at first appears to be a transgendered character, female to male, but the game ultimately fails to pursue this with the level of thoughtfulness with which it pursues Kanji's exploration of his sexuality and his likely identity as a gay man. As Evan Lauteria notes, the

romance mechanic of the game essentially supports a "normative sexuality" (13), and, ultimately, Yu's potential pursuit of Naoto as a love interest, and her interest as a heterosexual woman in him, dismantles an investigation of Naoko as transgendered. Lauteria further argues that in terms of the dialogue choices that prompt a romance with Naoto, they are "less explicitly about courtship and flirting and instead make primary Naoto's female biological sex" (18). He references here that if the player opts to court Naoko as a love interest, the choices that move the relationship toward a romance rather than a friendship center very much on the biological reality of Naoto as female. One such pivotal moment requires the player to respond, "I'm glad you're a girl" over the other possible responses. The other responses given as options in this instance will move forward their friendship, but not their romance. Yu reinforces the game's overall emphasis on heterosexual relationships, given that Kanji never pursues a homosexual relationship, and that Naoto's "correct" status is that of a woman.

As her social link strengthens and she reveals more of her own story, Naoto makes clear that what at first seemed to be a clearly preferred identification as male was really simply a means by which she succeeded as a young police detective—a savant, really—in a male-dominated profession. It was never an issue of sexual identity. Her fears mirror the reality in Japanese policing in the modern day. Jake Adelstein, quoting from Japan's 2012 National Police Agency Report, notes, "female police officers constitute roughly 7% of the 250,000 police officers nationwide" and that the report calls for an increase in women in policing, but only to a level of about 10% of the total force and that level would not be required until 2023 (n.p.). Naoto haltingly admits, after being forced to confront her Persona in the TV world, "I finally think I can accept myself. That I'm a woman…. That I haven't yet become the detective I wanted to be…. I … I am a woman … and a detective. One who is seeking the truth with you and the others." Her dialogue emphasizes, unequivocally, her identity as a woman underscoring that the main source of her desire to pass herself as male related to her fear that as a woman, she would make no inroads as a respected police detective. Her hatred of her outward expression of the female gender centered on how it hindered her professional aspirations, rather than it ever being an issue of her not identifying as female. The other main female characters also poke fun at Naoto specifically when they realize that she has large breasts, which she usually binds. While their teasing of her is good-natured and not cruel, it emphasizes that the game developers clearly decided against exploring transgendered identity. All of the narrative beats initially signaling that she may be transgendered are dismantled one by one until she affirms her heteronormative identity as a woman. That the game opts not to do so can certainly be characterized as a negative, most especially since the narrative had an opportunity

to thoughtfully explore this complex and important issue. The main flaw in Naoto's narrative lies in the strong identification Naoto seems to have through the first part of the story with being male. This, then, later leads later to a disappointing unraveling. Had the narrative instead chosen to pursue the idea of gender and culture in Japan, Naoto's story may not have felt so forced and a letdown to many LGBTQ players.

In consideration of how Kanji's story intersects with Naoto's, one conclusion to draw is that Naoto's development as a transgendered character was sacrificed to problematize Kanji's exploration of his sexuality. In order for the initial conflict to work, which finds Kanji attracted to a character he fully believes is male, Naoto must fully present as a male, not just in appearance, but in her initial interactions with Kanji, Yu, and the rest of their friends. Her eventual reveal as a woman and her increasing and vocal identity as a woman, leave Kanji in the more complicated narrative position. He has to reconcile his attraction for male-Naoto, whether that ultimately signals an attraction that transcends gender, or whether his attraction for her as a potential lover reverts to friendship once she is clearly female. The narrative plays this coyly. There are moments where Kanji and Naoto still seem attracted to each other, but that ultimately goes nowhere, and Naoto instead becomes a love interest for Yu. Summer Glassie argues, "Alternatives to sex and sexuality are very rarely explored as heterosexuality still dominates the industry, with homosexuality and bisexuality often marginalized or altogether absent" (162). Her comment is apt and does not include the additional complication of exploring, with dignity and honesty, transgendered characters. Adrienne Shaw argues:

> Queer readings may allow audiences to compensate for a lack of representation, but that does not preclude a demand for representation. Rather it signals that queerness is always-already a part of "straight" media and thus does not have to be seen as something at the margins. GLBT content does not have to exist just for those that identify with that acronym. Rather than approach this topic via audience reception, this study takes a cultural production perspective. Of interest is not whether video games can be "queered," but rather how members of the industry understand the place of and problems surrounding the representation of different sexual and gender identities within video games [232].

In the case of Naoto, there existed a profound opportunity to explore her as a transgendered character which was ultimately missed. Hopefully, as LGBTQ issues continue to advance, digital narratives will explore these issues with greater frequency and, especially in the case of transgendered characters, more boldly. Video games are not alone in being a storytelling outlet struggling in this manner. Because digital storytelling has often proved to be compelling, even risk-taking, one can hope that game creators will take notice and use the medium as a force to help normalize, rather than marginalize, people who identify as LGBTQ.

Issues of characterization and the player's ability to unlock individual characters' story arcs stand as two elements of the game's choice system. An additional element of choice in the game allows the player embodying Yu to take or encourage actions directly affecting the ending of the game. *Persona 4: Golden* has a number of possible endings: four variations of the "bad" ending, a "regular" ending, and a "true" ending. The choices that the player needs to make to invoke the true ending are not clearly broadcast.[39] The bad endings concentrate in many ways on the idea that the game's protagonists, including Yu, are all teenagers, high school students who have ended up enmeshed in the larger intrigue of the game. In addition to the primary issue of people being abducted into the TV world and confronted with their Personas, a secondary issue is that if those people are not rescued in time, they die in the TV world. Only later in the game is it revealed that someone has been abducting people, deliberately throwing them into the TV world, and murdering them. When the player and his or her friends are confronted with the deaths of those closest to them, the choices presented require the player to consider responses with a high degree of care.

The first two bad endings focus on the protagonists, directed by the player's choices, identifying the wrong killer—an admittedly strange and suspicious man named Namatame. The game reveals details as the player comes to them, with no option to skip ahead to the ending as one might with a film or written story. Thus, the player is forced to contend with circumstances as they occur, without the benefit of foresight. Namatame certainly appears to fit the profile of the murderer, and, worse, he *has* abducted people and thrown them into the TV world—this is how Yukiko ends up trapped there. After Namatame abducts Nanako, Yu's young and beloved cousin who is subsequently rescued but falls gravely ill, the team understandably reacts with fury toward Namatame. The team corners him, prepared to throw him into the TV world, where he will surely be killed by its monstrous denizens, the Shadows. The player is given three dialogue choices with which to respond to the situation, as the team looks to Yu for a final decision: "Push the bastard in," "I can't stay here," and "Wait a second here…" The first two options essentially bring the game to an immediate close, ending the possibility of continuing what would otherwise be a great deal of remaining story and character development, and forcing the player to make a true choice because not all of the others agree on a course of action. If the player opts for the second the choice, the game forces a reconsideration of the choice by having several of the players react in anger, and a dialogue option appears, asking the player, again, whether to leave or to push Namatame into the TV world. The story heavily implies that this option to do nothing, essentially leaving Namatame to the justice system, is the worst of the options, as the player rejects making a true choice. Highlighting this interpretation are the angry words of Yosuke, one

of the male protagonists: "How the hell can you be so half-assed about this?" While the player ultimately can choose to do nothing, the narrative does not privilege this as a worthwhile choice. Given the hours of investment the player has put into the characters and the story, to simply walk away from the narrative and end the game feels like a cheap avoidance of a more complicated moral choice.

The final two bad endings focus on the opportunity the player has to consider the evidence in the case one final time, as Yu waits at the train station to go home after the events with Namatame. If the team spares Namatame, he will go to trial and plead guilty to kidnapping, but not to murder. This provides the player with a dialogue tree and a series of choices related to uncovering the true murderer. To that end, if the player makes the wrong choice after being given three opportunities, the murderer remains at large and the narrative ends on a note of failure, with the player being unable to piece together clues given throughout the story to the identity of the true killer and leaving those in Inaba in continued danger. That true killer is Adachi, a rookie police detective who has been a part of the narrative nearly from the start and who comes across as somewhat lacking in commitment and competence in his job, but who otherwise appears earnest and good-natured. However, the game has carefully placed hints throughout that Adachi has the most connections to those who have been murdered, and his behavior, if separated from his outward exterior, does seem suspicious. This also forces the player to truly consider the Persona concept underpinning the entire narrative: no one in the game is who he or she appears to be, not fully, and everyone has a Persona with whom they must reconcile to become whole. In the final bad ending, the player can opt to confront Adachi about his being the murderer, then ultimately side with him and not turn him in. Although this last ending is perhaps incongruous, it is not beyond the realm of possibility given that in the real world, murderers are frequently aided and abetted by those who discover what they have done. Thus, rather than provide only good endings, the narrative allows the player choices that will lead to several poor narrative outcomes.

The difference between the "normal" and "true" endings hinges on the player privileging the social bonds he or she has forged throughout the games. The core endings themselves are the same: Yu identifies Adachi as the true murderer and does not protect him when given the chance. The team pursues him into the TV world and defeats him. The normal ending concludes with Yu's heading home to prepare to leave Inaba the next day. If the player chooses not to go home when prompted, he or she instead meets up with the team one final time. As the friends talk and enjoy one another's company a final time, because Yu will still leave for home, Yu considers that while they have correctly identified Adachi as the murderer, much of what has occurred—all

of the strange events—lacks a sense of cohesion. Yu uncovers the identity of the mastermind behind everything—a powerful creature named Izanami-no-Okami, who wants to merge her Shadow world with that of the human world. Although the uncovering of the mastermind brings a definitive conclusion to the narrative, that is not the most important aspect of the true ending. This ending allows the player to witness the continued friendship between Yu and the team. The normal ending concludes with Yu on the train back to his hometown. The true ending features him returning to visit Inaba and provides a narrative closure most in line with the game's core themes of being oneself and the power of friendship.

Although this is not an element related to the choice mechanisms of the game, it is worth noting that *Persona 4: Golden* provides the non–Japanese player with an insight into Japanese culture, and given that player immersion is a hallmark of the digital storytelling experience, the game is able to do so in ways other stories do not. As has been previously mentioned, much of the game's narrative takes place in the setting of a typical Japanese high school. Within the school, a critical location is Yu's homeroom, a place where he is able to hang out with several members of the team. In Japan, this homeroom is the heart of the educational system and is of primary social importance. As Steven Gump notes of this system, "All students have a homeroom, and they stay in this homeroom, with the same classmates, for the majority of the day" (789). Such is the case in the game. Taking the specific example of an American, the gamer witnesses and plays through a regimented school day that functions very differently from the standard American high school, in which students move from room to room for different courses. The game also includes a number of interesting cultural insights into daily life in Japan. For example, Nanako, Yu's young cousin, becomes excited as winter approaches and her father has given Yu and her permission to take out and use the kotatsu. The kotatsu, a heated table covered with blankets, provides a great deal of warmth to the person sitting with his or her legs under the blankets. Again taking the experience of an American, the gamer has not likely encountered a kotatsu before. Although it is possible to buy one online or to put one together following online instructions, the product itself has no cultural foothold in America. The kotatsu speaks to the reality that many homes in Japan lack the kind of central heating found in American houses, and thus the kotatsu becomes a necessary source of warmth. Because it requires close proximity to the heating source, it also encourages a sense of community as family or friends gather around it. While the American gamer could certainly choose to simply ignore such details, these elements open up the more intriguing possibility that a player could learn at least something more about another culture, simply by playing attention to the immersive details of the game's environment. *Persona 4: Golden* crafts a narrative arc scaffolded by

its emphasis on social relationships and deepened by its deep immersion into Japanese culture.

The choice-based narratives considered in this chapter so far have primarily centered on those decisions related to morality or relationship building. The form, however, can also be utilized to craft deep political intrigue and complexity. *Far Cry 4* takes a similar approach to the importance of paying attention to environmental details, but in ways that become far more politically complex than the ideas and storyline presented in *Persona 4: Golden.* The game is open world and presents the player with an involved main storyline, as well as a plethora of side-quests, all taking place within the fictional Himalayan dictatorship of Kyrat. Choice also proves to be a larger and more critical component of the game in terms of the player's willingness to invest not only in the numerous side quests and their substories but more importantly in a series of steps leading to a choice that will irrevocably shape Kyrat, for both better and worse. The first choice presented to the player early in the game, perhaps 15 minutes into the story, is designed to test the player's willingness to follow orders versus the player's tendency to want to escape a potentially dangerous situation and help save someone perceived as an ally. This particular choice—one that could cause the game to end here—is also a possibility in the game *Gone Home*, a short independent title that will be discussed later in the book. Why this choice is so important in *Persona 4: Golden* centers on the narrative's willingness to avoid forcing the player into a sense of inevitability at the start of the game. The player embodies Ajay Ghale from a first-person viewpoint, and from the start, he or she becomes immersed in the complex political landscape of Kyrat. Ajay himself is Kyrati American and returns to his ancestral land after the death of his mother, having promised to scatter her ashes there. This puts him in direct contact with Pagan Min, Kyrat's eccentric and oftentimes brutal dictator. He and his forces, the Royal Army, are entrenched in a bloody battle for control with the Golden Path, a resistance group seeking to topple his regime.

Before Ajay becomes fully immersed in the violence gripping Kyrat, he is apprehended by Pagan Min and taken to the ruler's lush retreat, allowing the player an almost immediate and in-depth encounter with the game's supposed antagonist. Min appears to be every bit the over indulged ruler: he sports flashy clothing and bleach-blond hair. Yet to Ajay, at least, he is courteous, even deferential. He knew Ajay's mother and seems to respect her and begins to make clear that he wants Ajay to join him as a surrogate son, someone to whom he can pass rule of Kyrat. Thus, the narrative centers on an initial request made by Pagan Min to Ajay, as the former prepares to torture Darpan, a member of the Golden Path who had been escorting Ajay on his mission to scatter his mother's ashes. Pagan requests of Ajay that he, "Please

stay right here. Enjoy the crab Rangoon. Don't move. I'll be right back" as Darpan is dragged off. What the player is now left with, narratively, is a true choice. If the player embodying Ajay remains in the room awaiting Min's return, it signals a choice to ally with the dictator or possibly a choice on the player's part not to risk angering Min, who is both unstable and violent. The player is also given the first main mission of the game, displayed in the upper left portion of the screen, directing him or her to "explore De Pleur's mansion." If the player does so, and leaves the main room, the game's main narrative continues on. If, however, the player waits for approximately four minutes, doing precisely what Pagan Min had requested, Min returns, apologizes for the delay, and takes Ajay to the place where his mother wanted her ashes spread. The credits then roll. Certainly, the game developers would not intend for the player to spend $60.00 on a game with about 60 hours of content should the player complete as much as possible, only to end the game 15 minutes in with none of the more complex story explored. One would imagine that most gamers would, at that point, start over again and try the other option, which is to follow the quest directive to explore the mansion. However, the fact that the game *can end* almost as soon as it starts proves a crucial point about the role of choice in storytelling. If players are to be given a fair amount of latitude in how they play a game, then that necessarily has to include the opposing choice, in this case, of waiting for Pagan Min's return and doing nothing in the interim. It is a choice essentially involving a distinct lack of play, but one that also places the player on guard. Choices matter and play out in ways that might prove unexpected.

This dovetails with the overarching choice with which the player is finally faced, relatively late in the game, but it is a choice that is a culminating event after the player has viewed the actions of two main characters in the game, Sabal and Amita, who are initially presented as protagonists. Both are high-ranking officers in the Golden Path, but look to very different outcomes for Kyrat following a successful overthrow of Pagan Min. Sabal constantly talks to Ajay of his dreams of bringing back Kyrat's traditional culture, much of which has presumably been lost under Min's rule. Amita reasons that while traditions have their place, those who next rule Kyrat must instead look to a future and to choices that allow Kyrat to be self-sufficient. At least at first, both Sabal and Amita seem reasonable, just on opposing poles of a vision for the post–Min Kyrat. However, as the narrative unfolds and the player begins to undertake missions directed by each of them, matters become more muddied.

To lend more weight to the complex history and outcomes for Kyrat, *Far Cry 4* looks to history as its starting point. The rebel uprising in Kyrat is based on the Maoist uprising in Nepal, a conflict lasting 10 years, from 1996 to 2006. However, the game does not slavishly fold the history of this real-world event

into the game. S. Murshed and Scott Gates explain two specific terms applicable to uprisings such as the Maoists in Nepal, "*grievance*, based on a sense of injustice due to the way in which a social group is treated, often with a strong historical dimension; and *greed*, an acquisitive desire similar to crime, often on a much larger scale. According to the proponents of the greed theories of civil war, 'greed' is disguised as political grievance" (122). Both of these concepts, more so than the specifics of the Maoist conflict as it relates to the narrative about Kyrat, Pagan Min, and the Golden Path, prove to be essential in understanding the complex events that begin to unfold and increasingly involve Ajay, and therefore the player. However, the player has no foreknowledge of the events that will play out, only learning more about Kyrat and its major power players through advancing the narrative. What at first appears to be two rebel leaders who differ on philosophy, but who both have Kyrat's interests at heart, begins to shift into a darker exploration of power and opportunistic greed.

Sabal and Amita both speak with great earnestness about how Kyratis have been treated under Pagan Min and the rightness of their respective viewpoints, and they both agree that Min must be ousted from power. To develop Sabal and Amita further, the narrative places the embodied player in the position of selecting tactical approaches and choices toward missions based on what one or the other wants. An early main mission, called either "Rebel Yell" or "Hunt or Be Hunted" depending on which choice the player makes, begins to bring into focus Sabal's and Amita's approaches. The player must choose one of two paths for this mission involving Min's forces and an imminent attack on a Golden Path camp. Sabal wants Ajay to help defend the camp, whereas Amita believes it is better to go after the soldiers for their intelligence, even at the sacrifice of civilians.[40] Sabal establishes an early trait of caring for the Kyratis as they are now, even to the point of being guilty of nostalgia and wanting to re-create earlier Kyrati culture, whereas Amita seems to always look to a bigger picture, even at the sacrifice of the innocent. In the next major narrative branches, resulting in either the "Burn It Down" quest or the "Reclamation" quest, depending on whether the player sides with Sabal or Amita, choices become far more weighty and complicated, even more so than choosing whether or not to defend a civilian population. These missions involve determining the fate of a large opium farm under Min's control, one that brings his regime a great deal of wealth. Sabal wants Ajay to burn the fields, while Amita believes that the Golden Path should instead take over the fields and enter the drug trade as a means to earn money for their cause now and a free Kyrat down the line. She argues, "Sabal, we have no natural resources. What happens when we're free? The mines have been stripped, the fields have been ruined for years. So we liberate our people, and then what?" Sabal counters primarily with the ideas that the drug trade is bad for

Kyratis and that drugs are poison. The choice here for a player may come down to a matter of personal ethics concerning the international drug trade and its damage. However, the player may also see Amita's logic. Pagan Min has been bleeding Kyrat dry of all possible resources, and while Kyrat could soon be free, it would immediately be a nation of the destitute, easily susceptible to falling under foreign influence or the rule of another tyrant like Min. It could reasonably take many years for a free Kyrat to establish its footing even without the extra complications Amita mentions regarding a lack of natural resources.

Both viewpoints have validity, and therein lies the narrative's complexity regarding Sabal and Amita and the larger political complexities related to countries that finally succeed in overthrowing a dictator. At this point, neither one of them has been wholly unreasonable. Amita perhaps shows more of a willingness to be ruthless, but Sabal could just as easily be faulted for his overall naiveté in terms of what it will take to defeat Pagan Min and establish a free Kyrat. The narrative adds additional complexity to the remaining choices by revealing to the player that Sabal and Amita are not simply altruistic freedom fighters with only Kyrat's best interest at heart. Indeed, both are revealed to be deeply flawed, if not odious, in their true attitudes. Sabal talks constantly of tradition, especially religious traditions. The player learns that a central hallmark of this traditional culture involves a teenage girl named Bhadra, who Kyratis believe is the reincarnation of one of their goddesses. Sabal wants not only to formally "install" her as this reincarnation in a ceremony but also to take her as his own child bride, which he believes is afforded under traditional custom. Amita uses this particular point, especially, as a means to try to sway Ajay, and thus the player, to her side. She argues that under a "traditional" Kyrat, women will have few rights. Later in the game, a main mission leads to Ajay coming under the effects of a powerful hallucinogenic drug, one whose effects arguably stretch credulity a bit. In this vision—whether it is in the past or future is difficult to determine—Amita orders her own soldiers to round up the children of a group of villagers and then warns the villagers that if they do not stand down and return to their homes, she will "have them shot." The context here is not clear, although it is eventually made so if the player opts to side with Amita near the game's conclusion. However, the events Ajay witnesses are chilling enough that it would give the player pause to consider what it might take for either Sabal or Amita to go from being rebels fighting for a free Kyrat to dictators in their own right.

In the earlier missions establishing character and motivation, the player can choose to side with either Sabal or Amita, and although the party not chosen will be suitably angry, the player can continue to choose between them until the latter part of the narrative. This allows for the player to either

explore each viewpoint or side early with one. However, the narrative refuses to allow the player to essentially run interference between the two warring Golden Path leaders or to choose one over the other without consequences. Eventually, a definitive choice must be made, but by the time this mission branch appears, the player realizes that perhaps neither Sabal nor Amita is a suitable leader for a new Kyrat. The player speaks to both Amita and Sabal, with each now ordering Ajay to kill the other. Although the player can also opt not to kill either Amita or Sabal, the character the player sides against will not be heard from again, presumably fleeing into exile. The choice of loyalty to Amita or Sabal will also directly impact the ending of the game.[41]

The choices the player makes regarding Amita and Sabal and then a final choice involving Pagan Min allow for five possible endings.[42] Three involve Pagan Min, who by the end of the narrative has revealed that he knows much about Ajay and his family and that he had a great deal of affection for Ajay's mother. He also knows the location of the shrine/memorial to Lakshmana, revealed to be Ajay's half-sister, where his mother wants her ashes spread. The player can first choose to kill Pagan Min in his palace. If the player does so, the game ends and credits begin. If the player does not, Pagan Min then takes Ajay to the shrine. After doing so, Pagan Min leaves in a helicopter. The player can shoot Pagan Min at this point or allow him to escape. This particular choice has no further bearing on the narrative's ending, which takes place in a final cut scene involving either Sabal or Amita. However, it allows the player a degree of agency regarding the character who at first appeared to be the obvious antagonist of the narrative, but then evolves into a figure who really seems no worse than his potential successors in the Golden Path. It is clear from the context that Pagan Min has no intention of attempting a coup to retake power but will find a safe haven with all of the money he has likely stolen from Kyrat on his way out of the country.

The game's concluding cut scene underscores the reality that there is no "good" choice between Sabal and Amita. No matter which one the player chooses, the next leader of Kyrat will bring as many problems as boons to the Kyrati people, who clearly are the losers throughout the entire game's exploration of the pursuit of power. Pagan Min comments at one point, "Men only really love you in hindsight, when too much distance has built up." *Far Cry 4* allows the player an uncomfortable lack of distance in the formation of Kyrat's future and then forces the player to see the consequences of those choices. If the player chooses Sabal, Amita has been proved right. Sabal has turned Kyrat into a fundamentalist religious regime and is using Bhadra as a tool to legitimize his own power. Furthermore, he murders anyone who had previously sided with Amita. However, if Amita is chosen, the player learns that she will move Kyrat's opium trade forward and to run it most cost efficiently to maximize her profits, she uses child labor. Even more ominously,

Bhadra is now missing, with Amita saying only, "I've sent her away." Whether she has killed her is unclear, but it is a strong possibility. Amita does not seem one to risk having Bhadra, believed to be the reincarnation of a goddess and thus a tie to Sabal's way of thinking, potentially return and sway opinion against Amita. The player does have the option, once the cut scenes are over and control of Ajay is returned, to kill Sabal and Amita at this point. Although the player may feel some sense of satisfaction in doing so, the narrative does not provide any further insight into Kyrat's future.[43] The player fought a long campaign, watched a fledgling rebellion develop, and successfully overthrew a dictator only to then wonder if anything really changed for Kyrat after all. By not offering a neat, happy solution to the issue of Kyrat's future, the game developers allow the narrative to mirror what is often seen in reality: that fledgling democracies often fail after the dictatorial regime is overthrown. As Daron Acemoglu and his co-authors assert, "Societies in which nondemocratic regimes in the past have chosen large militaries may have difficulty consolidating democracy and may end up with military dictatorships. This result is not only intuitive, but it also provides us with a particular reason why social conflict in nondemocracy may create costs for (future) democracies" (3). This proves to be the case with the situation in Kyrat. Pagan Min had ruled for many years due to a combination of his own personal charisma and his willingness to utilize his army to neutralize, brutally, all opposition. It also manifests in the infighting between Sabal and Amita, which effectively fractures the Golden Path and creates a scenario wherein the winner of the power struggle takes over, but with both a weakened force and his or her own tendency toward megalomania.

The long-form examples in this section of the chapter detailed those games that use a high degree of player choice to drive their respective narratives to both large and small degrees. They range from the highly complicated choice structure governing nearly all aspects of the story arc in *Mass Effect* to those related more intimately with character, as in *Persona 4: Golden*. Certainly, the choices here represent a small fraction of the diversity in storytelling offered in video games centered on player choice. Each of them, however, served to explore a different facet of the construction of meaning and narrative as found in video games.

Games with Long-Form Storytelling and Shaping of the In-Game World

Games in this category share traits with the previous one in that they both feature long-form narratives and a high level of player choice, but this section isolates one particular feature of those choices: game environment.

Although some of the previous game examples dealing with choice also share some of the same traits as those in this category, these examples allow the player to shape the overall game environment in particular in new and inventive ways. This mode of choice varies from narrative choice, in which the storyline is determined by the player's actions. In these two examples, *Shadow of Mordor* and *InFAMOUS Second Son*, the player's choices drastically shift conditions within the game environment without necessarily directly impacting the main overall narrative. Frans Mayra notes, "Games are put into meaningful uses by their players, resulting in games and playing *making sense* for these individuals" (24), a concept that intersects in compelling ways with the particular form of in-game world making exemplified by these titles. In both cases, the games allow the characters to make a variety of choices that shape the overall mythologies of their in-game worlds—structural elements such as politics and public sentiment—in a manner that makes the most sense or is preferable to each individual gamer. This is different from the construction of politics in a game like *Far Cry 4*, where it is inextricably linked with the game's main narrative and the player's choices regarding Amita and Sabal. These two titles are not the only ones to afford this particular form of choice to the player, but each presents a unique take on the overall concept.

Shadow of Mordor, released in 2014, comprises two separate but interrelated game components. The narrative-driven portion of the game explores J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* books and the film series by focusing on the intervening years after *The Hobbit* but before the events of *The Fellowship of the Ring*. The game is open world, yet also limited in that its environment consists primarily of the no man's land that exists between the guard posts of Gondor and the Black Gate. Within this area, orcs are a primary threat and exist within their own hierarchal armies. The player embodies Talion, a Gondorian ranger who dies in the opening sequence of the game, yet continues to endure in a state between life and death due to his merging with the Wraith Celebrimbor, an elf who had, many centuries before, crafted the One Ring for Sauron.[44] Because Talion must navigate a dangerous orc-infested landscape, he turns his attention to finding ways to sabotage their power structure as a means to destabilize his enemy. While the main narrative of the game is certainly interesting, the focus in this analysis is on this ability to destabilize and reshape the orc armies, which the game developers call the Nemesis System. The player accesses the Nemesis System through a specific menu, and it displays the hierarchy of orcs currently in the area. At the top of the power hierarchy are the Warchiefs, the toughest of these foes to defeat, which are followed in a pyramid-like form by increasing numbers of subchiefs and grunts. Michael de Plater of the game's developer, Monolith Productions, notes of the system, "It's about letting players create their own stories and their own memorable, personal villains. There's a lot of AI and technology

under the hood, but from the players' point of view it brings the Uruk Social Network to life, so that any enemy can rise up through the ranks and become a boss. They also remember and react to their encounters with the player, so they build up their own stories over the course of the campaign" (Jones n.p.). This last point is especially important to this particular aspect of choice within the digital storytelling experience. Each orc appearing within a given player's Nemesis System is uniquely generated from an expansive library of names, traits, motives, and fears. While the possible combinations are certainly not limitless, they are vast, and this leads to each individual player experiencing a particular set of power hierarchies that are different from those of other players.[45]

This uniquely generated set of orcs populating the player's particular iteration of the narrative acts as its own separate storyline, one focused more on the player's ability to manipulate the orcs to his or her own advantage than on a larger plot structure. *Shadow of Mordor* introduces the player to the Nemesis System through a main narrative quest, in which Talion is tasked with destabilizing the orcs in a particular area by defeating their Warchief. As a result, the player finds that the orcs have to be shifted around and a new Warchief named, introducing the idea that the player's actions, via Talion, manifest in clear and specific ways within the orcs' own hierarchy. Some other story-related quests involve the Nemesis System, but the player is otherwise free to concentrate solely on the orcs, leaving the main story quests aside for however long he or she wishes. This puts the player embodying Talion in direct control of the orcs' larger social and political structure. Killing orcs shifts the balance of power, causes promotions or demotions, and may even create infighting between those with more power and those who want to ascend the orc power structure. In addition to killing orcs, the player can humiliate powerful orcs through acts such as sabotaging their victory feasts, which can then lead to internal power plays among the orcs, without the player's having to necessarily kill a Warchief outright. Given the ubiquitousness of the orcs in the game's world, the Nemesis System will constantly update and generate new foes. A player could potentially kill all of the orcs within his or her Nemesis System, but, eventually, more will replace the fallen, creating a constantly shifting balance of power.

Although this particular aspect of the game does not add to the main narrative concerning Talion and Celebrimbor, it serves to dynamically immerse the player within the brutal hierarchy of the orcs. It also gives the player free reign to manipulate that system however he or she sees fit, even for no other reason than to cause chaos within the orcs' ranks. Furthermore, the game remembers the player's failures as well as successes regarding the orcs. Once a player attempts to kill an orc—any ranked from a grunt all the way to a Warchief—the player has incentive to be successful. If the orc manages

to kill the player or escape, that orc will remember the outcome. This creates a situation in which the game directly and individually interacts with each player. For example, if a player attempts to kill an orc and fails, but wounds the orc with fire, that orc will not only bear the burn injury but may also develop a fear of fire, along with a healthy hatred of the player. If the player is killed by an orc,[46] that orc, even if it is a low-ranking grunt, may rapidly rise to the position of Warchief. Ken Levine, creator of *BioShock* and writer of *BioShock* and *BioShock Infinite*, finds this particular type of choice-based component to be an important addition to the digital storytelling genre. He notes:

> But here's the great part. Nobody tells you how to take down this crime family. You wanna take down Lorm Metal-Beard first to undermine his master, Dharg the Black? Go to it, pal. You wanna turn Horhog the Armorer into a double agent so he backstabs his boss Goroth Caragor Tamer? More power to you, sister. As I was playing the game, I wondered, "How are they doing this? How are they letting me kill so many bosses in any order? Doesn't that break the game?" And then I realized: The orcs aren't bespoke characters. They comprise dozens of bits of micro-content that can be mixed and matched to build thousands of combinations on the fly. An orc named Horhog the Armorer is actually "Name X the Name Y." The attributes that make up Horhog's character—he's afraid of fire but angered by the sight of his minions dying—are chosen from a list and assigned by the game dynamically. Even his body, his armor, his scars are attached *algorithmically* as the player meets Horhog on the field of battle. Horhog will even remember that the last time you met, he kicked your scrawny human ass. These orcs, and how you choose to defeat them, are the story of *Shadow of Mordor.* They project both real menace and an almost slapstick Grand Guignol, the love children of Sauron and Eliza Doolittle [n.p.].[47]

Levine's thoughts on the Nemesis System highlight its potential as a unique source of digital storytelling in future titles via this particular approach to procedurally generated material, meaning those elements are not predefined as set pieces within the game. Rather than just being a secondary component to the main narrative, this form of choice-based play could take shape as the main narrative itself. The player's interactions may determine what happens next, how other characters react to the player, and other such possibilities. This type of narrative may end up lacking the scope of storytelling found in more traditional forms of digital storytelling, even those heavy on player choice, but may instead provide a compelling experience on a smaller scale, with the player's every interaction having a measurable effect on the in-game world.

Where *Shadow of Mordor* explores a new form of storytelling through its Nemesis System, one which focuses on small but nearly inexhaustible narrative moments over larger, more intricate plots, other games may instead utilize the manipulation of the in-game world as a means to complement and highlight elements of its main narrative. *InFAMOUS Second Son* shares with

the *Mass Effect* series the ability for the player to decide whether Delsin Rowe, who the player embodies, will become good or evil. However, to avoid retreading common ground with the Paragon/Renegade system in *Mass Effect*, the focus with *InFAMOUS Second Son* is on other unique ways that player choice shapes the in-game environment over time and on those elements of this particular good/evil system that are unique and provide other avenues for considering the intersection between player choice and digital text. The player embodies Delsin Rowe, a young and initially troubled man who discovers that he has superpowers. In the game's world, those who have such powers are known by one of two terms, depending on who controls the rhetoric: Conduits or Bio-Terrorists. The United States Department of Unified Protection (DUP), led by the brutal Brooke Augustine, captures and imprisons all Bio-Terrorists, as they call them, in an isolated prison named Curdon Cay. The player's choice, as Delsin, lies in how he or she wants to react to this hatred and discrimination. The game takes place in a Seattle that is otherwise contemporary, save for the excessive surveillance set up by the DUP. The citizens of Seattle, driven to fear and hatred by the anti–Conduit campaign run by Augustine, initially react with hostility toward Delsin. Michael Barnett and Cassandra Sharp discuss the system of karma as it relates to the first two *InFAMOUS* games, and the points they make are salient to *InFAMOUS Second Son* as well. They argue, "Because *InFAMOUS* provides players with only two ethically charged alternatives where certain behaviors, responses and actions are either 'good' and promote lawfulness, or 'evil' and disavows the place of law, the game provides an intriguing opportunity to reflect upon not only the imbricated nature of law and morality, but also the polarized circumstances in which a player might view law as legitimate or otherwise" (492). Because the DUP herds Conduits into a concentration camp-like setting, this iteration of the series takes the stance that the governmental powers of law and order are not to be distrusted and strip otherwise innocent citizens of their civil liberties. Therefore, the player's choices center far more on broader concepts of good and evil, as opposed to dealing strictly with issues of lawfulness or lawlessness.

Depending on the choices the player makes, Delsin moves along the game's karma system toward either good or evil. Of special note here is how Delsin's powers evolve based on where he is on that scale. Unlike games such as *Mass Effect* that allow the player to remain throughout the series on a scale between good and evil, *InFAMOUS: Second Son* forces the player to choose one mode of play over another, as certain augmentations to the player's skills and powers are only available as good or evil. These power-ups, however, drastically reshape the game's environment and the player's interactions with it. Delsin—who is a special type of Conduit that can absorb the superpowers of his fellow Conduits—has one set of abilities under the umbrella of his

Smoke skills. Smoke allows Delsin to, among other things, travel through vent systems and utilize smoke and gas in a weaponized form. One particular skill is sub-branched depending on whether Delsin is good or evil. The first option, Knockout Headshots, allows Delsin to subdue any foes non-lethally. This, in turn, contributes to good karma. The second sub-branch, Sustained Fire, allows Delsin to fire lethal smoke bullets at his foes. However, the evil karma skills also tend to be less controlled and precise than the non-lethal options, so this usually leads to Delsin killing innocent civilians as well as his enemies, which then contributes further to bad karma. Once the player starts down a particular behavioral path, while he or she may lose some karma points for committing an evil action, the die is otherwise cast. A good player cannot suddenly decide to become evil or vice versa. Stefano Triberti and his co-authors argue, "The video game player is not to be conceived as a machine that automatically repeats the behaviors it sees. On the contrary, the player actively enters the game with his or her own characteristics and elaborates the complex information received from the game" (2), underscoring that each individual player will need to put into context the hostility unfairly directed toward Delsin by both the DUP and NPCs throughout Seattle and decide whether these hostile actions will cause him or her to react with lethality or with restraint.[48] However, such choices would not be subject to vast changes in attitude from one scenario to the next, and any overall movement from one end of the moral scale to the other accrues over time, over a series of small choices, rather than one all-encompassing choice. Not only is a drastic shift in behavior marked by one particular choice not generally applicable to real life, it also undoes the game's weight on small choices. When the player chooses a certain set of skills, he or she must then utilize those choices and cannot opt mid-game to explore the game's other skill sets without starting a new playthrough, forcing the player to work with the consequences of his or her actions rather than placing the karma system on a sliding scale such that the player has opportunity to change the embodied character's standing within the game.

In the story, public perception feeds the DUP's ability to detain and jail Conduits, whether to make that task straightforward or a public relations disaster. The player embodying Delsin has the ability to turn the tide of public opinion toward Delsin through the completion of specific categories of side quests. There are numerous types of quests that can be completed, so only a representative few are considered here, as they all have the same net effect of transforming the attitudes of Seattle's citizens. The first set of side quests relates to the DUP's constant surveillance of all of Seattle's citizens through the use of hidden cameras scattered throughout the city. The citizens are even more prone to lash out at Conduits, and Delsin, due to the heightened fear this monitoring causes. They seem to reason that as long as the government

is busy going after Conduits, it will not come after them. After Delsin destroys the cameras, citizens tend to congregate in those camera-free zones, which lifts the initially oppressive feeling throughout the city. The player can also rescue innocent civilians from attacks by mobs who suspect them of being Conduits and can heal those who have been injured by these mobs or who are otherwise hurt. Finally, Delsin can apprehend drug dealers throughout the city. All of these actions, although small, converge to reshape Seattle into a safer and more livable city.

Over time, actions like these not only raise his karma level but also make a marked difference in the city and its denizens. At the start of the game, citizens often hurl insults at Delsin as he walks by. As the player begins to complete these side quests, the citizens begin to offer encouragement and will sometimes protect the player from DUP forces. The player has the option to be evil in each of these cases, which would involve not destroying the cameras, further injuring those bullied by mobs, and killing drug dealers after they have surrendered. The choice remains with the player. Garry Young's assertion regarding moral choice and violence in video games that there is always an "impossibility of negative consequences for the NPCs" (55) is of interest here because this is a virtual space, one free of the consequences the player's choices would have had in the real world. The issue proves to be an interesting one and reinforces the complex idea that a player can enact in a virtual space what he or she would never dare do or even have a predilection to do in real life. However, such conversations often avoid discussion of the play style of a given gamer as potentially separate from that gamer's own personal moral tendencies. What becomes of greater interest and importance lies in the examination of how choices in a given digital narrative impact the very nature of gameplay and virtual space. Whatever the individual player's choice, these changes allow for a deeper sense of connection between deed and environment, as opposed to a situation in which the NPC characters in a game continue to react to the player in the same manner, with the same dialogue, no matter what actions the player does or does not take. *InFAMOUS: Second Son* focuses on issues of Othering and bigotry, and the player has an opportunity to change the minds of those who initially hate and fear Delsin for no reason.

The games given in-depth consideration in this chapter all demonstrate digital storytelling's unique ability to tell an immersive, player-involved story over dozens of hours of play time, utilizing different techniques of immersion and agency to support and forward those stories. While choice is certainly one means by which player immersion can be achieved, it is not required for a relevant, meaningful story. By its very nature, playing a game creates a relationship between player and text, one in which the player always has some degree of agency due to the very act of playing, regardless of any specific

narrative choices he or she might be called upon to make over the course of the game. The focus in this chapter has been on long-form games, those requiring many hours of player investment in the narrative. The next chapter explores games with shorter play times and considers how, within that format, the digital storytelling format remains compelling and powerful.

4

The Primacy of Story Part 2
Shorter Playtimes, Profound Storytelling

The division between the first set of digital narratives and this next section lies in the length of time required to complete the game. The 40-hour mark was set as the dividing line between games labeled long form and those here that come in under that mark, whether to greater or lesser degrees. However, although the overall gameplay time can be significantly shorter with games in this section than with their long-form counterparts, that does not preclude these titles from developing storylines in compelling and innovative ways. In considering again the idea of scope and length of a digital narrative as opposed to traditional storytelling forms in literature and film, one finds that even a game requiring 10, 20, or 30 hours still far outpaces, in scale and depth, the length of any film and the time it would take the average reader to complete most novels. For comparison, the extended edition of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, not counting the credits, runs just over 11 hours. The average adult reads at a pace of approximately 300 words per minute (Nelson n.p.), meaning that, barring interruption, he or she would be able to complete a novel the length of *The Scarlet Letter* in approximately three and a half hours. If the same standard of playing a video game with thought and care is applied to film and to literature, here meaning that the viewer or reader takes notes, perhaps pauses to consider a scene in more detail, and takes other steps to engage critically with the text, another hour or two could potentially be added to that total time. That brings the total investment in a given digital story at the non-long-form level to an equivalent length of some film series and novels, but many digital stories will still outdistance, by many hours, their storytelling counterparts. Astrid Ensslin describes more "literary" video games in this way: "Literary games, on the other hand, have to be seen as a highly regulated, rule-bound, and structured subtype of literary play. They are therefore not a subtype of fiction, poetry, or drama but are, indeed, a particular type of game that embeds literary elements but has conceptual

and interactive emphasis on the ludic structures of the artifact at hand in addition to the aesthetic effects and processes it evokes" (41). While her analysis provides a bit too restrictive to fully detail the complexity of forms found in digital storytelling, Ensslin raises an important point as to the intersection of the literary and the ludic. Certainly, great games, as with great stories, need not be built on those types of plots that might be deemed "literary," and not all "literary" forms of storytelling succeed in their loftier storytelling goals. That aside, what is often overlooked in discussions of video games is their ability to understand common themes, tropes, and styles, and then to celebrate or even subvert them. At the heart of good storytelling lies the human experience, that which connects reader or player to what is both fundamental to the human story and also embodied within the struggles and adventures of a given protagonist. The smaller scale, or short-form, digital narrative must necessarily sacrifice numerous side quests and far-flung, expansive vistas and locales for the sake of economy of space, thereby focusing much more sparingly on story.

The smaller scale game offers the player a variety of choices in terms of genre and form, and player choice may underpin the entire story in the same way it might in the long form. *Until Dawn*, an innovative deconstruction of many stereotypical horror tropes, provides one example of the central role of player choice in the shorter format. The game features a playable cast of eight characters, young adult friends who reunite after a terrible tragedy leads to the death of two of their own.[1] The concept of the butterfly effect, that small actions can have unforeseen and wide-ranging consequences, is presented from the start of the story and signals the player's own wide-ranging ability to shape the story. The overarching horror plot deliberately starts with expected structural features of horror films and stories familiar to players and then systematically deconstructs them, providing a refreshing and novel take on the genre. The plot unfolds, at least on a superficial level, in the tradition of any number of "teen slasher flicks," wherein the titular teens or young adults are murdered one by one in gruesome ways, usually until a lone female remains to face-off against the killer.[2] The game's plot is intricate, consisting of 10 chapters and a prologue, and some context is needed prior to considering the game in closer detail. The game begins with a prologue wherein the action takes place one year before the start of the game's present day, which appears to be set in the modern day given the events and context. In the prologue, the same group of friends, with the addition of the twins Hannah and Beth, gather at the Lodge, a large estate owned by Hannah and Beth's family. Their brother, Josh, is there as well. Three of the friends play a cruel prank on Hannah, resulting in her fleeing the Lodge into the wintry night. Beth goes after her, and the two are never found. The player is provided with more information, as a spectator, than the remaining eight protagonists,

meaning that the player will embody one character at a time, but will switch perspectives at varying points in the game. Hannah and Beth encounter a stranger, and in fleeing from him, the pair slips over the edge of a cliff. The choice mechanism requires the player to decide, as Beth, whether to drop Hannah to maintain her own precarious hold on the cliff's lip or to hold on to her twin. The choice here has no impact, serving as a means of introducing the player to the overall choice mechanism rather than allowing the player to impact the story at this stage. No matter the choice, both young women fall, and the player sees that the impact appears to be fatal. The remaining protagonists, and later law enforcement, have no luck in recovering the bodies. The major plot point concealed from the player at this point lies in the aftermath of that fall. Since the prologue ends with the fall, the remainder of Beth and Hannah's story does not unfold for the player until nearly the end of the game. While Beth is clearly dead, and the player likely assumes that Hannah met the same fate, the latter survived the fall into a derelict mine. Over the course of the next month or so, Hannah eventually resorts to cannibalism, consuming Beth's corpse. At this point, the narrative moves away from the strict slasher motif and toward supernatural ground, interweaving both horror genres masterfully. Hannah devolves into a creature called a Wendigo, a human being who turns into a deadly humanoid beast after eating human flesh. While one Wendigo would prove lethal enough, there are at least 12 others on the mountain whose own stories provide a compelling and tragic secondary narrative.[3]

Against this shared pain between the friends, the narrative then moves forward in time to explore the lives of the friends in the aftermath of tragedy, one caused by their own bullying and carelessness. Josh gathers the remaining eight friends back to the Lodge one year later to commemorate his missing sisters, believed to be dead, and to celebrate both their lives and their friendships. Shortly after the group is reunited, Josh appears to die a gruesome death at the hands of some unknown killer. In the interim, the Wendigos begin to hunt the group. The player is immediately placed off-kilter because until more of the story unfolds, he or she is uncertain whether the dangers are human, supernatural, or some conflation of both. The narrative gradually brings together the two disparate threads, the supernatural and the real. Josh is dressed, in the tradition of horror stalwarts Michael Myers (the *Halloween* series) or Jason Voorhees (the *Friday the 13th* series), to look like a maniacal killer stalking the remaining friends. Through documents the player finds, he or she learns that Josh has had psychological disturbances since he was young. The events of the previous year with Hannah and Beth, coupled with his refusal to take his medicine, have sent him into a spiral. In his mind, he is just playing a "prank" to get even with his friends. While he does not seem to want to kill them, his actions send them all into the path of the Wendigos.

The Wendigos constitute the supernatural element of the game, and they are as they appear: monstrously twisted creatures who were once human, but who now prey on anyone who comes close to their territory on the mountain. The game concludes, depending on the player's choices, with any combination of the main characters alive, from zero to all eight, a unique feature of the game's structure that will be discussed in more detail. Ebenezer Samuel says of the game's placing of the player in the central role of determining each character's fate,

> Do you send Mike (Dalton) down into the cave after his girlfriend, or have her explore alone? Side with one girl or the other in a verbal conflict? Each decision carries obvious film importance, even if the "right" choice isn't always clear. The decision-making system excels in making those choices have consequences that aren't immediately obvious, yet showing you how it all connects in a Butterfly Effect menu. Defending one character could lead to an issue much later, ignoring this situation will have a profound effect chapters down [n.p.]

His words underscore how *Until Dawn* transcends devolving either into a disorganized mess of horror tropes or a simplified choose-your-own-adventure type of narrative with peril as the main backdrop. The characters' fates do not just lie in a series of actions, as in choosing to go left or right at a given moment. Instead, their interpersonal relationships and the choices they make in how they treat one another have just as much impact as the player's choices during chase sequences.

The initial construction of the eight main characters conforming to specific horror tropes may serve to initially lull the gamer into a sense of complacency—the player "knows" these types and what to expect. Chad Habel and Ben Kooyman address the difference between the experience of viewing a horror film and being embodied within a horror video game, noting, "In contrast to the plurality of gazes available to the horror filmgoer, horror gaming typically reduces the plurality of gazes available, focusing on direct first- or third-person identification with the avatar" (4). Their idea proves useful in understanding the specific narrative construction of *Until Dawn*. The eight protagonists (although Josh is later revealed to be an antagonist) fall into what appear to be easy and typical horror categories: Sam (Final Girl), Josh (first victim of homicidal killer), Mike (the ladies' man), Jessica (the slut), Emily (the mean girl), Matt (the jock), Ashley (the smart girl), and Chris (the nice guy). However, the story unfolds chapter by chapter, with the player embodying every one of the eight protagonists at various points in the game. In this sense, the player identifies not only with one avatar, as per Habel and Kooyman, but with all the main characters available in the story. This forces the player to make choices while embodied as each character and also allows the player to observe the other characters while viewing the narrative through one particular character's point of view. This multiplicity of viewpoints, as

well as the choices afforded the player as each of these protagonists, soon shatters the stereotypes and reveals *Until Dawn* as a horror narrative well versed in traditional horror tropes while determined to upend them in compelling ways. Indeed, it is the player's own narrative prejudices that become increasingly shaken as the story unfolds. For example, the player learns that while Emily is prickly and prone to confrontation with the other characters, she also harbors a profound sense of guilt over having participated in the prank leading to the disappearance of Hannah and Beth. She is also on the defensive because she is the former girlfriend of Mike, who has brought Jessica on the trip, and she has brought Matt, who she appears to be dating as a rebound romance after Mike left her. Although it is initially easy to label her the "bitch" of the group, and there may be some degree of truth to that given that she can be deliberately cruel, the game allows her far more depth, showing her own deeper insecurities and preventing her from falling into a typical female horror stereotype. The others in the large cast of main characters similarly reveal their own histories and backgrounds, such that the labels that are placed on them by players quickly prove faulty. Graham Reznick, one of *Until Dawn*'s lead writers, spoke of the deliberate construction of these characters noting,

> The characters and scenario are definitely meant, at the outset, to be incredibly familiar. That familiarity is more or less meant to give the player the feeling of "oh, I know what this is—I know where they're going with this" and create a false sense of security … before all of the twists and turns. The stereotyped characters allow you to start with a group of people you may have strong initial impressions of ("Oh, I HATE Chris" or "Man, Sam is the BEST")—but as you begin to make choices, you have the potential to veer them from their cliché beginnings and into really interesting people with strong arcs—essentially revealing the characters that had been hiding underneath all along [Bocanegra n.p.].

The player, then, is ultimately left in the position of having to constantly reevaluate snap judgments as the story progresses and view each character embodied in the same way the gamer may view those in the real world: as flawed individuals who may present one particular outward face as a means to avoid appearing vulnerable or to cover up hurt. Unfortunately, in some cases, the player learns too late that he or she has misjudged a previous encounter with another character.

The game follows a specific pattern for each of its chapters, one that at first appears to break the fourth wall to involve the player directly in shaping certain aspects of the story, but later adds an extra layer of complexity by revealing that the player has, instead, been embodying Josh in these sequences. Each chapter ends with the player visiting the analyst, Dr. Alan Hill, who begins the initial sessions by asking the player about different fears and phobias, without any other reason or context for why the player is there

or who the player embodies. To further destabilize the player's sense of embodiment within these sequences, Dr. Hill refers to the events of the game itself as if they were an external story. In the first sequence, for example, Dr. Hill states that the deaths of Beth and Hannah cannot be undone, but that he will help see the player through the ensuing "game" and the choices that will need to be made. When these sessions are revealed as Josh's hallucinations, they take on new shape by giving the player insight into Josh's increasingly deranged state of mind as he plays this "game" and these pranks on his friends.

That aside, the sessions shape each of the chapters in interesting ways. They intersect with the real world and the player's own fears such that the narrative takes on very personal meaning by reflecting to the player that which is most personally frightening. In the prologue and chapter 1 sequences, Dr. Hill asks the player to provide his or her reaction to unsettling images or items. In the prologue, the player is shown a picture with a house in the background and a field and scarecrow in the foreground and is asked to reflect upon it. The player is given the choice to respond with either "It makes me happy" or "I feel uneasy." Although the game does not signal this to the player, the choice impacts the name given to the first chapter, which is either "Friendship" for the "happy" response or "Memento Mori" for the "uneasy" response. This proves to be rather subversive when the totality of the narrative is taken into account. If the player initially remains positive, the game starts the first chapter on a seemingly good note, setting up the hope that the group of friends, fractured after the events of the previous year, can reunite. The fear-focused response reminds the player from the start that this is a horror game, and he or she would do well to remember that death may lurk anywhere in the environment. In the chapter 1 session with Dr. Hill, the player is given a series of two image sets and is asked to select the one that evokes the most fear. Of note are choices among snakes, spiders, or cockroaches, and between clowns and scarecrows. The player's chosen phobia will show up within the game environment at subsequent points. In later sessions, Dr. Hill becomes more aggressive and unhinged himself, reflecting Josh's mental state, and will begin to taunt the player over his or her choices and actions and overall role as the architect of the narrative. As Dr. Hill reflects toward the end of the prologue session, "So. You have committed to commence with this 'game,'" and indeed, the player begins the game in a role positioned between participant and creator, amplified as a fundamental component of gameplay in *Until Dawn*, but a role wholly unique to digital storytelling.

The choices in the game rely on very minor details, wherein the outcome is not certain, and on the player's taking time to explore the environment such that he or she notices particular details at times when the narrative itself may be marked by tension and fear. As such, the player learns quickly that

no choice, however minor, can be considered a throwaway part of the story. In Caetlin Benson-Allott's 2015 interview with horror scholar Noel Carroll, he describes his view of the nature of horror as a form as distinct from other others, arguing, "There are certain genres that take emotional states as their very aim. I took horror as being that kind of genre. Again, like Aristotle, I thought of horror as having a certain kind of structure as a result of its aim of eliciting a certain emotional response. In this way you're analyzing the intention to do something, even if the intention fails" (338). *Until Dawn* functions effectively as a digital narrative, keeping this concept in mind, in ways that a film version may fail to fully accomplish. The player must approach every situation, no matter which character he or she embodies, as if the choices made in that moment impact not only that character's ability to survive the immediate moment but also other characters and their survivability in subsequent parts of the story. Herein lies the most important aspect of *Until Dawn*'s choice system and its game mechanics: every one of the eight main characters can survive the story, and all eight of them can be killed.[4] Furthermore, some characters can die in more than one scenario, meaning that just because a character seems to have avoided a grisly end, that may not preclude a similarly lethal situation happening again. The narrative avoids being a self-contained series of chapters, each featuring the player embodied as one particular character. Events leading to a particular character's death in one chapter may actually have their narrative roots one or more chapters before, and sometimes, the means to keep a character alive lie in the player's attention to environmental clues or dialogue that may not appear to be directly relevant to later events and to found items, such as documents or pictures. Again, in this example, the player's willingness to fully interact with the digital world becomes an inherent component of the narrative itself.

The game provides the player with tools and items that help the player to understand *how* the narrative constructs meaning, choice, while at the same time, keeping these clues deliberately obtuse. The player has the opportunity to find, with extensive investigation of each area, items called "totems" that provide some degree of guidance but only go so far in signaling forthcoming narrative events. The totems are grouped into five categories: danger, death, fortune, guidance, and loss. Each found totem plays a very brief (lasting no longer than 10 seconds) and de-contextualized clip of a forthcoming event that may or may not be relevant to an event within that particular chapter. The totems offer no guidance in terms of player choice and in important ways may make choices more complicated and nerve-wracking. Although the player can view a totem as often as he or she likes, the course of action dictated by the totem remains unclear. One danger totem shows a brief clip of Ashley holding a flashlight while saying, "Mike, generator!" The killer (Josh in disguise) appears in the frame and hits/kills her. The player may initially

assume that during the sequence in which these characters are either attempting to find or fix a generator, the totem warns to be extra vigilant. The reality is far more complicated and underscores the game's overall emphasis on small choices—even logical ones—leading to unexpected outcomes. Prior to the scene with the generator, the player embodying Ashley has an opportunity to grab a pair of scissors to keep as a weapon. Given the situation, arming oneself would appear to be a perfectly reasonable choice, and taking the scissors appears to be the right choice as well. Ashley is confronted by the killer and is able to wound him with the scissors, but he ultimately punches her and takes her prisoner. This is not the event that has the potential to cause Ashley's death, but it does cause her injury. The player may have taken the scissors expecting to be able to defeat, or even seriously wound, the killer. Instead, the killer becomes more enraged when Ashley attacks and then injures her.

Two other player choices merit closer study in that they both have the potential to lead directly to a main character's death and force the player to reconsider the very nature of what it means to make a choice. In one set of events that can lead to Chris's death, the player's best narrative choice is likely the one that does not appear obvious or even permitted by the game's mechanics.[5] In chapter 6, Chris and Ashley are both captured by Josh and are strapped to chairs. A revolver is within Chris's reach. The player embodies Chris during this sequence. As a set of saws descend from the ceiling, Josh states that Chris must choose to shoot himself, or shoot Ashley, and the one remaining alive will survive. Ashley makes the situation more complicated by imploring Chris to shoot her, stating, "If I do one last thing in my life, let me do this." A marksman's target then appears over each character's head with a countdown, leaving the player a small window of time to make the choice. It appears to be a thankless choice, one that will leave one of the main characters dead and the survivor likely guilt-ridden. The player has to calculate not only the moral angle of the choice but also the narrative possibilities of leaving one character alive over the other. What the player may not initially realize is that no choice is actually necessary and no action—even in the face of the timer actively counting down and placing the player under the pressure of a perceived required choice—is acceptable in this scenario, and is indeed the best option. If the player does nothing and the timer runs down, Chris will fire a shot toward Josh, revealing that the gun was filled with blanks, and the saws do not descend enough to cause Chris's or Ashley's deaths. Had the player opted to have Chris shoot himself, this action carries no negative ramifications and if anything, Ashley bonds more fully to Chris due to his selflessness. However, if the player chooses to shoot Ashley, she harbors a deep resentment over this, which will lead to Chris's eventual demise. In chapter 8, Chris will have to flee from a Wendigo, running some distance outdoors from his initial location

to the safety of the Lodge. If the player successfully navigates escaping from the Wendigo and makes it back to the Lodge, he or she finds Ashley on the other side of the locked Lodge door. She will refuse to open it, and the Wendigo will quickly dispatch him. Although Ashley's actions appear thoughtless and heartless, she appears to be in shock, and perhaps she never meant to kill him, just to scare him, but the Wendigo moved more quickly than she expected. Given that Ashley has, until this point, been one of the most consistently kind and levelheaded characters in the story, turning her into a murderer, however inadvertent, dramatically shifts the narrative for that player.

While Chris's death follows a logical line of thought, from the choice to shoot Ashley to her choice not to open the door, one death in particular proves far more complicated to avoid. Matt has three possible deaths in the game, two in chapter 6 and one in chapter 10. The first involves the player embodying Matt having to move through a large herd of deer. Matt can opt to shoot, which will lead to his death, but the game has, up to this point, provided plenty of clues and information related to the natural environment of the mountain and the importance of protecting it, so his death after attempting to kill an animal, narratively, does not provide any surprises. Similarly, in the third potential death event, the logical course the player needs to follow to keep Matt alive has been transmitted to the player, even though the actual steps are difficult, as they involve the player successfully hiding from the Wendigos. The second possible death event happens later in chapter 6 and proves far more difficult to avoid than the first. The player must opt for choices that may not seem consequential or that go against the player's survival instincts. These choices are made more complex by the player's embodying Emily and Matt at different points during this sequence, and Emily tends to demean Matt in her interactions with him, which may make the player as Matt antagonistic toward Emily. During the latter part of chapter 6, Emily and Matt argue over whether they should try to reach a radio tower to call law enforcement for help. The player, as Matt, can agree with Emily's desire to go or disagree. From a purely logical standpoint, going to the radio tower seems like the better option. Otherwise, they plan to return to the Lodge, which appears to be the more dangerous choice, given that the player has been led to believe a killer stalks the group. In this case, though, the player must disagree with Emily.

This makes sense from a narrative standpoint, in that Matt may be more likely to disagree with Emily about anything because of her treatment of him, but the "correct" choice here is not obvious. When Emily and Matt reach the tower, the player, now embodying Emily, must search outside the lookout tower carefully to find a flare gun, then must choose to give the flare gun to Matt. Again, this likely goes against the player's instinct to keep any sort of potential weapon, given that he or she is playing as Emily at the time. If Matt

had originally disagreed to go to the tower, he will keep the flare gun. This allows him, later in the chapter, to be able to defend himself against a Wendigo. If the player as Matt had agreed with Emily about going to the tower, Matt will immediately fire the only flare. Andy Hartup observes that "By necessity, *Until Dawn*—like so many other games—needs to funnel its players down certain paths to complete its narrative, and that leads to unsatisfying results" (n.p.). However, the critique he makes of the game's choice system—that it is too binary and presents choices and outcomes that do not always come together seamlessly—reveals itself as too narrow for understanding how player agency impacts digital storytelling in the game. Certainly, *Until Dawn* provides players with one of two options in each applicable scenario—to do something or not to do something—forming the overarching category of choices. However, given that each major character can die as a result of those choices, the funneling Hartup speaks of proves to be less relevant as an overall issue. The game will eventually end—its narrative must conclude—and any story in any medium necessarily "funnels" its readers, viewers, or players, in one form or another, down a path to a given end. The more important aspect for consideration—and what makes *Until Dawn*'s particular use of choice intriguing—lies in the game's attempt to mimic the range of choices players make in their everyday lives, from the obviously momentous to the mundane.

The final specific narrative element to be considered in *Until Dawn* involves the player's level of engagement with the game's different locations and environments, and underscores the critical roles that careful exploration and observation play in the potential outcome of this game, as is also the case with many other video games. In chapter 10, Sam and Matt eventually come upon Josh in a mine after he has had a complete psychological breakdown. If the player embodying Sam explores the area fully before encountering Josh, he or she discovers the journal Hannah had kept after she and Beth fell into the mine. The day 30 entry presents a harrowing and horrifying account of Hannah, out of hunger and desperation, digging up Beth's corpse and eating it. This sets her down the path of transforming into a Wendigo. Sam reveals this information to Josh, who is later attacked by Hannah in Wendigo form. With the information given to him by Sam, Josh recognizes Hannah by a tattoo on her arm, and when he calls out her name, the beast pauses in its attack and then drags Josh away. Otherwise, she will kill him immediately. Saving Josh leads to an epilogue showing his fate, and it leads the player to question whether the greater mercy lay in allowing him to die. A search crew finally finds Josh, who has been down in the labyrinthine mines for an indeterminate time, during which he, too, has eaten from the corpses of those in the mine and has begun to change into a Wendigo. As the scene fades to black, Josh turns on the search crew and likely kills them.

The issue of the fate Josh "deserves" in the player's mind is complicated on a number of levels. Clearly, his attempt at a "practical joke" on his friends was uncalled for, but he never intended to put them in true mortal danger and had no way to realize that the mountain held true danger: the Wendigos. Secondly, Josh's mental state is already tenuous at the start of chapter 1 and continues to degrade until he is deep in the throes of psychosis and appears to be incapable at that point of fully understanding his choices and their consequences. The player, through exploration, can also discover that Josh had a long history of mental illness stretching back into his adolescence. So the player who finds Hannah's journal and therefore triggers Sam's revealing of the truth to Josh is left to question the value of that truth. Josh wanted all along to figure out what had happened to his sisters and to find their bodies. Sam reveals the truth, but the purpose of this seems questionable at best. The player cannot at that point control Sam's revelation to Josh, and, indeed, he or she may have avoided doing so if given the opportunity. In this way, *Until Dawn* never allows the player to fully relax into the narrative such that he or she becomes inattentive. The player never knows precisely how any given choice, however small, may unfold.

The branching narrative choices in *Until Dawn* function in much the same way as clues given to the reader of a mystery novel. The reader's task is to remember even seemingly minor details if he or she wants to reach the correct conclusion, with the end goal usually being the correct identification of the killer. However, in a digital narrative like *Until Dawn*, the weight of the choices differs from that of a mystery novel, as the player's choices actively determine which characters remain alive during the story. Unlike a mystery novel in which events *have already been determined*, digital storytelling has the unique opportunity to present a story that at many points exists in a state of potentiality. In the specific case of *Until Dawn*, although other games feature similar mechanisms, its game save feature prohibits any backtracking to a previous event if the player makes a choice leading to an undesired outcome. The game saves automatically and frequently and always immediately after a choice is made. This eliminates the possibility of a player quickly resetting the game after an unwanted outcome unfolds. The game will have locked in the player's narrative at the exact point of choice. However, gamers may choose to play the entire game many times after the completion of the initial playthrough to experience narrative threads that they did not explore the first time. *Until Dawn* in particular—with characters able to die at least once and often at several points in the main narratives—offers the player rich incentive to revisit the digital story.

The next two games to be analyzed, *Life Is Strange* and *The Walking Dead*, are both "episodic," meaning that the developers released the games over the course of a number of shorter "episodes" of gameplay. Although the

episodes vary in length from game to game and from episode to episode, they average about four to five hours of gameplay each. Further, both share a relatively straightforward control system. Neither game has a combat sequence, for example, which would require the player to perform more complex tasks with the controller. Instead, the games focus largely on exploration of the environment, and any tasks the player has to fulfill are clearly and easily signaled. Games of this sort, which concentrate heavily on story while still providing player choice, are proving to be more popular over time and provide new players with a less intimidating way to explore digital narrative than do the more complicated, combat-centric games. Nick Zurko argues,

> In other words, the easier it is to pick up a game, the more likely it is to have a lot of fans. This is true for most episodic games today since few of them are demanding in terms of button inputs, reaction time, etc. All it takes is a button press or two to make dialogue choices, move a character, and complete a quick-time event. Someone who is intimidated by input-demanding games will have no trouble checking out your average episodic title [n.p.].

This highlights the accessibility of titles like these two for those who might not otherwise consider themselves traditional gamers.[6] It also allows for each game to attend to a much higher degree on narrative itself, given that the player is not otherwise tasked with performing any complex mechanical actions within the game world. What might for some gamers become a distraction is set aside in favor of allowing the player to concentrate on story and environment.

Life Is Strange, released as five episodes from January through October of 2015, chronicles the story of Max (Maxine) Caulfield, an eighteen-year-old woman in her final year at the prestigious private school Blackwell Academy in Arcadia Bay, a fictional small town in Oregon. Against that simple backdrop of a young woman's coming-of-age story lies a narrative fraught with weighty issues related to bullying, guilt, and the giddy power of wish fulfillment. The player embodies Max throughout the game and through her must make a series of emotionally thankless and devastating choices. The game begins on a gritty note, with Max witness to a confrontation between Nathan, the drug-addicted and mentally unstable son of one of Arcadia Bay's richest families, and Chloe, who used to be Max's best friend, in the bathroom at Blackwell Academy. In these opening minutes, Nathan explodes into a rage over Chloe's attempt to extort money from him, and he shoots her. It is clear the wound is mortal and Chloe dies, a troubled drug user and dealer, on the bathroom's floor. It is this moment to which the game will return on more than one occasion and which calls into question the idea of redemption. The narrative juxtaposes this against a narrative continually suggesting that this, death as a young woman under violent circumstances much of her own making, is Chloe's irreversible fate.

Yet the player does not necessarily see these larger and weightier themes at the start, embodied as a terrified Max in a high school bathroom. Max and Chloe's relationship forms the backbone of *Life Is Strange*'s narrative, and at the start of the game, they have been estranged for a while. Max's move to Seattle, which means she is in Arcadia Bay where Chloe lives only during the school year, coupled with Chloe's descent into drugs and rebellion following the death of her father when she was 14 years old drive a wedge between the young women. The re-introduction of Chloe into Max's life proves both harrowing and redemptive and is the catalyst for Max to gain the ability to "rewind" time, as it is referred to in the game. In his review of the game for *Ars Technica*, Steven Strom observes, "Ripples making waves through the past is nothing new to time-hopping science fiction, but *Life is Strange* is one of the few games in recent memory that actually makes you go through the motions of choice, consequence, and 'fixing' the timeline. The investment the player makes in the central duo heightens the heartbreaking actions you're repeatedly forced to take—and take back—causing an even stronger reaction in your *next* round of decision-making" (n.p.). The specific mechanism of Max's ability to "rewind" time consistently complicates the narrative, both by its presence and its absence. After Max witnesses Chloe die, she finds she is able to "rewind" this event and activate a fire alarm in the bathroom to save her. From there, the reunited friends rekindle their friendship as they seek to unravel the mystery behind the disappearance of another teen, Rachel Amber, to whom Chloe had become quite close. As the events related to that mystery continue to unfold, Max has visions of a supernatural tempest destroying all of Arcadia Bay. While the player is heavily pushed to identify Nathan as the perpetrator of the crime, the true murderer is Blackwell's photography teacher, Mr. Jefferson. He kidnaps young women, drugs them, photographs them, usually in suggestive photos, and then murders them. Nathan envisions himself to be something of a protégé to Mr. Jefferson, so the player has reason to suspect him as well. *Life Is Strange* also explores the lives of a number of the residents of Arcadia Bay as their lives intersect with Max's, so this analysis of the game represents a condensed exploration of its narrative, focusing on two key narrative events both related to player choice.

The game places the player in the role of Max for the entirety of the game, but this creates the potential for a significant disconnect, age- and experience-wise, between Max as a teenager with a particular set of experiences and worldview and the player. Marek Kohn argues that, "People are inhibited from certain courses of action, and induced towards others, by their beliefs about what is right, wrong, proper, and improper, by their desire to be good according to their culture's lights, their desire for respect and acceptance, and their abhorrence of shame" (16) and that this provides a powerful set of guidelines determining behavior in their everyday lives. When applied

to *Life Is Strange*, his words underscore the importance of the difference between Max and the player, no matter how much he or she identifies with Max and her story. One could readily argue that most teenagers, however good or kind, prove to be inherently self-centered as they find their way and more fully begin to assert agency over their lives and choices. The player must make a number of choices throughout the game, some of which have permanent ramifications and all of which add emotional weight and depth to the story. However, the choices given to the player do not necessarily correspond to the decision an adult with more life experience than Max may make. Instead, the choices are couched through Max's perspective, that of a naïve, yet kind-hearted teenager who ends up with increasing tunnel vision in her quest to save Chloe, both literally and figuratively.

The story of Kate Marsh, Max's classmate and friend, provides a great deal of emotional weight in Episodes 1 and 2, and many of the choices players make regarding interactions with and about her lead to the climax of her story in Episode 2, when she threatens suicide by jumping off one of the dorm buildings. Kate's story, and her possible tragic end, highlight the idea that the player's own emotions and responses, when held in contrast to Max's, have the potential to drastically shift Max's final chance to save Kate before she jumps. As is the case in a number of moments in the game, Max cannot use her rewind powers here to re-do the choices given to save Kate. Although this may seem at first like a cheapening of the narrative—giving Max a power only to take it away at pivotal moments in the narrative—it functions far differently as the player moves through the storyline. Max continually uses her power to try to "fix" situations, and the more she does so, the more the fabric of reality frays as a consequence. There is never an explanation given as to why Max gains the rewind power in the first place, but the strong hint thematically is that it allows her to have a chance to be friends with Chloe again and to save the women of Arcadia Bay from two dangerous predators: Nathan and Mr. Jefferson. Additionally, Max's power to rewind time seems to be consistently available when Chloe is involved, either directly or indirectly, circling back to the idea that no matter how many times Max rewinds time to save Chloe's life, Chloe was never meant to survive. Kate has no narrative ties to Chloe, so it makes sense that Max's ability to influence time would be weaker here.

Life Is Strange does not make the mistake of backing away from the gravity of the moment or the permanence of Kate's death by suicide precipitated by sexual assault and bullying. The unfortunate reality is that many teenagers commit suicide or attempt to, and the game does not provide a moment of reprieve where Kate miraculously survives her fall should she choose to jump. Kate's choice of suicide results from her sense of hopelessness and deep shame over a video taken of her while she was drugged at the Vortex Club's party,

and the clear implication that Nathan sexually assaulted her. Kate never opens up about this, which makes sense given how the event has humiliated her and brought on her the anger of some members of her own family, but does state that she felt "gross" when she awoke hours later, outside her dorm room. The extent of the video taken of Kate is also not fully disclosed, but the worst remains on the periphery. The video that makes the rounds of Blackwell Academy seems to only show Kate drugged and acting promiscuously, including kissing a number of young men. However, it is not unreasonable to extrapolate and conclude both that Nathan raped Kate and that he filmed the event. This heightens the anguish Kate feels, but also sets up a gulf between what Max knows, that the video has been circulating and some of the young women at the school, especially Victoria, delight in Kate's misery, and what she may not even consider, that Nathan raped Kate. In an op-ed piece written for *Polygon*, Laura Dale reflects on how this particular moment of the game resonated with an event in her own life. She writes,

> We spoke for about six hours that night. I tried to keep her talking by breaking our time down into seconds and minutes. I tried to scare her into fearing oblivion more than she feared her present. I tried to tell her things would get better and I tried to make her see that I cared about her. I desperately clung to what was left, hoping that I could find a way to keep her with us just a little longer. I didn't know her real name, nor where she lived. I couldn't contact the authorities. By the end of the night, Sarah had committed suicide [n.p.].

Dale's memory and sense of futility dovetail well with what *Life Is Strange* does in its characterization of Max, who sometimes believes that she knows everything, but painfully learns at a number of junctures that she misjudges situations, sometimes to great tragedy. Dale then reflects on how her own experiences as a teen intersected with Kate's storyline in the game, noting, "By giving me control of the situation in *Life is Strange*, developer Dontnod Entertainment suddenly forced me to inspect my own agency in my life. That has an emotional price attached. This is the power and beauty of games; what feels like an echo of pain in other art forms feels like a punch in the gut when the same topic is explored in a well-made game" (n.p.). Dale's words highlight the power a digital story has to involve the player directly in such a way that the emotional tension becomes heightened, more so in this case because she could directly relate to what happens to Kate. Even without that more personal connection to the narrative, the player is placed in the role of decision-maker and driver of the story such that consequences—serious ones in the case of Kate opting to commit suicide—gain more weight.

The player can save Kate, but this requires taking a number of steps in both Episodes 1 and 2, and some of them may go against the logic of an older player, even though the "correct" choices function logically as those a high school teen may make. Furthermore, the player embodying Max knows that

Kate is upset about the video, but has no real warning that Kate has become suicidal over it. Therefore, as is the case with the story related by Laura Dale, the player tries desperately to save Kate and still proves unsuccessful. In Episode 1, the player has to focus on activities that show Kate that Max cares about her. Certainly, nothing seems particularly odd about this course of action. However, what Kate considers to be a show of solidarity might not seem as obvious. Of note is an instance in Episode 1 wherein Max comes on Kate being harassed and aggressively question by David, Chloe's stepfather and the head of security at the school. David knows that drugs were used at the party and are commonly circulated by members of the Vortex Club, but he has wrongfully assumed that Kate was a willing participant in what happened. Max, due to Chloe's hatred of him, is predisposed to think the worst of David and automatically assumes that he is at fault for confronting Kate when his mistake lies in assuming that every student at the party was equally complicit in using drugs. He fails to view Kate as a victim in crisis. At this point, the player has the choice to either confront David or to take a picture of him confronting Kate to use as potential evidence against him later. This is where Max's motivations and the player's may be at odds. Kate will react negatively if Max does not intervene—Kate catches site of Max—and accuse Max of not standing up for her. Certainly, given how strongly Max dislikes David and how little respect she has for him, confronting him, even though he is both an authority figure and an adult, would not be out of character. However, the player may reason that the photographic evidence, given how strongly the narrative at this point edges the player toward thinking that David could be the murderer, might prove more valuable.[7]

Later, the player receives a phone call from Kate at an inopportune moment when Max is hanging out with Chloe. Chloe wants Max to come with her immediately and is indignant over Max's taking the call. Chloe goads her by saying, "Big whoop. You don't call me once in five years and now you're over some beeatch…. I've got other people to hang out with too." Certainly, Chloe's words are both cruel and juvenile, but they exert a great deal of weight in the moment when the player must choose whether or not to answer the call. If the player ignores the call, this again leads toward a scenario in which Kate believes she has no support and will commit suicide. Max, and therefore the player, cannot predict how missing one phone call from Kate will be interpreted.

The final major narrative choice focuses on Kate's wanting to go to the police about Nathan in Episode 2. Max can either encourage her, or ask her to wait until they have more evidence. The game again creates a disconnect between what a teenager may logically do—rush to the police believing that the bad guy will get justice—and what the adult gamer may think—the evidence specifically against Nathan is scant at this point, and he said/she said

cases of sexual assault are shamefully treated by the American justice system. As with the previous choices, Kate will not see reason regarding this choice and wants to go to the police. Her courage and her willingness to stand up to Nathan are commendable, but the reality is that all Kate has are her testimony and a video that does not definitively show her lack of consent. The police are equally likely to side with Nathan, a young white man from a powerful and wealthy family, as they would with Kate.

With all of these choices already decided and tilting the narrative toward or against Kate jumping, the player embodying Max has one last conversation with Kate on the rooftop and must answer correctly to all prompts—keeping in mind that Kate is both religious and desperately in need of feeling a sense of friendship. Furthermore, the dialogue choices in this section change depending on the choices the player has already made. This includes limiting the number of choices to which Kate will positively respond, even ones that appear to be logical, if the player has acted in opposition to what Kate needed. For example, if the player answered Kate's phone call, he or she is presented with two dialogue choices at one point, "You're my friend" and "I'm here for you," and Kate will respond positively to either one. If the player did not answer the call, the choices become "It was in silent mode," "My phone died," "I was with Chloe," and "I thought it was Warren." The third choice is the only truthful one, but must be avoided. Kate will only respond positively to the first choice. What the game builds to here, powerfully, is the weight of the player's choices as they directly affect Kate's willingness to trust Max.[8] If Kate commits suicide, this event haunts Max and the other characters as the story continues, emphasizing both the permanence and gravity of Kate's situation.

Kate's death also marks an essential feature of the story: Max, even with her rewind ability, is unable to bring back the dead, except for Chloe. This powerfully illustrates Max's powerlessness in the face of death and avoids the narrative providing her with such superhuman abilities that the player never has to worry about the outcomes of choices. Although she tries to do so on more than one occasion, Max does not successfully, or permanently, resurrect anyone from the dead, with the exception of the option to save Chloe at the end. If the player does not make the correct series of choices needed to save Kate, then she dies, and Max's rewind power is unable to change that outcome. Max and Chloe eventually find Rachel Amber's body, but Max cannot rewind time that far—her power is limited to events in the immediate present—and therefore she cannot give back to Chloe a person she dearly loved. Finally, and most poignantly perhaps, Max cannot save Chloe's father, William. This last event bears closer analysis. Technically, Max successfully saves William in Episode 3 of the game, due to an unpredictable expansion of her power that allows her to enter certain photographs and go back in time to when they

were taken. These photos must be of either Max or places she has physically been, and the primary narrative purpose of this ability lies in her entering a photograph of her and Chloe, taken just before William leaves the house and gets into a fatal car accident. However, Max's desire to do a wonderful thing—save the Price family and keep Chloe from a darker path—has unintended consequences. Max, now existing in a brand-new timeline, goes to visit Chloe. When Chloe comes to the door, she is wheelchair bound, paralyzed from the neck down, having been in a car accident herself. As these events are picked up in Episode 4, Max learns that Chloe will soon die from her extensive injuries and that the medical bills have crushed the Price family. Chloe will then beg Max to "euthanize" her by turning off her ventilator. Whether the player does so or not will not change the outcome in this timeline: Chloe will die that night or in the immediate future. The moral burden, then, is placed upon the player who is forced to decide whether or not to euthanize Chloe. Max, agonized regardless of the player's choice as to Chloe, chooses to "undo" her change of this timeline by going back into the photograph and, this time, letting William leave the house. Max's sense of futility, and the player's, lies in having to accept that no action exists without its own consequences and that saving Chloe may simply be impossible.

The fact that Chloe dies over and over again acts as a foreshadowing of the game's ending. Aside from the alternate reality in which Chloe is paralyzed, Chloe dies at several other moments during the story. In Episode 2, Chloe gets her foot stuck in some train tracks and is killed by a train. Max uses her rewind abilities to save her, as she does again at various points in Episodes 4 and 5. What becomes clear to the player remains lost on Max: Chloe's true fate lies in the opening events of the story with her death in the school's bathroom. *Life Is Strange* concludes with the player making a critical choice that determines both Chloe's fate and the fate of everyone else in Arcadia Bay. All players of the game reach this choice, and it is always presented in the same way, with just two zero-sum options. The player can either save Chloe, resulting in the complete destruction of Arcadia Bay, or allow her to die in the bathroom, where the narrative started. Whereas the player's previous choices have had weight and affected other events in the story, this last event is scripted such that he or she has no choice but to select one option or the other.

The ending makes clear Max's desperate desire to save her friend, but the player is left to consider whether Chloe is really worth saving, when doing so requires the willful killing of everyone else in Arcadia Bay. As Manuel Velasquez and his co-authors argue, "Appeals to the common good are confronted by the problem of an unequal sharing of burdens. Maintaining a common good often requires that particular individuals or particular groups bear costs that are much greater than those borne by others" (n.p.). Max's choice

to save either Chloe or the town of Arcadia Bay is one she bears alone. Unlike a scenario in which the course of the outcome may be debated by a group of people, or perhaps a group within a government, the player embodying Max must make the decision at the game's end knowing that no one, except for Chloe should her survival be the outcome selected, will know that Max had to bear the weight of her choice alone. The complexity of the choice stems from a number of sources, both internal to the narrative and the player's investment in it and external to the player's own particular moral inclinations in the face of a choice to save only one life or to sacrifice one to save countless other lives. The player has invested 20–25 hours to reach the narrative's concluding moment, and in that time the game has been careful to develop the rekindling of the friendship of Max and Chloe in deep and believable ways. Because they cannot rely on adult authority figures to help them navigate both the nature of Max's time rewinding power and the very real dangers of predators in their world, "Max and Chloe reach out and grip tightly to each other like two drowning swimmers paddling for the surface. The pair obviously love each other, as shown by the many times they guide each other not just through life-and-death situations but day-to-day decisions" (Strom n.p.). In the moments leading up to the choice, the two young women stand alone, with no adult to guide them, as Max prepares to bear the burden of her choice.[9]

Two intertwining sets of narrative events strongly urge the player to sacrifice Chloe and suggest that this ending is the game's "true" or intended ending. The first relates to the many instances in the intervening events following Max's saving Chloe for the first time in the restroom to the final choice to save her in which Chloe dies. As the game progresses, it is clear that Max's power is taking its toll on her physically. Her nose bleeds increasingly more copiously, and, toward the very end of the game, she sees "holes" in her reality that resemble the holes and scorch marks fire leaves on photos as they burn. Given the timing of the problems Max begins to have with using her power, it is logical to conclude that each time she refuses to allow Chloe to die, she is doing more damage to herself and to the timeline that is intended to exist. However, that does not mean that Max's entire story and her ability to save Chloe at the start of the game have been meaningless. Far from it. The conclusion, then, is that Max's power allows her to stop a killer and gives her the chance to have closure with Chloe and to say goodbye, both of which she avoided in the original timeline. Chloe receives an opportunity, albeit bittersweet, to live just a bit longer and to heal her deep emotional wounds by having more time with Max. This also leads Chloe to implore Max to sacrifice her at the end, not to save her, as the initially selfish Chloe would have been wont to do. The game symbolizes this transformation in character through the presence of a bright blue butterfly, which first appears in the bathroom

with Max just before Chloe dies for the first time. The butterfly, certainly, represents the overall concept of the butterfly effect, how the player's choices have lasting effects within the story. However, and more importantly, it is symbolic of Chloe herself. Chloe is the butterfly—she has the opportunity to emerge from a darker life to share moments of friendship and sisterhood with Max. However, butterflies are fragile and short-lived. They signify change and rebirth, but those two concepts do not have to correspond to the idea that Chloe's rebirth is synonymous with her living out the rest of her life. She is reborn, to a certain extent, during the time in which Max explores and interferes with the timeline. Chloe says as much in the moments leading up to the player's final choice, when she tells Max that their new memories "were real and they'll always be ours." Yet the new memories she creates with Max are indicative of the life Chloe *could have had all along*, save for her bad choices. Certainly, the estrangement with Max was an issue, but not an insurmountable one, and Chloe, however much she consistently blames everything bad in her life on the death of her father, has made consistently poor choices, despite her mother and stepfather trying to keep her away from trouble.

On a more problematic level, then, Chloe's attempts to change herself occur during the events of the altered timeline, and she fails to change to any significant degree. The moments of genuine happiness shared between the two do not obscure Chloe's continuing troubles. Max loves Chloe and desperately wants to protect her and that blinds her to the realities of Chloe's behaviors and actions. Chloe tells Max that her life has been "dipped in shit" since the death of her father, but much of that is, sadly, of her own making. She chooses to drop out of school, begin using drugs, and associate herself with drug dealers and criminals. She demonizes her stepfather, David, to such a degree that Max, at least for a while, shares her view. It is not until later in the game, should the player opt, as Max, to try to understand David, that it becomes clear that while he is off-putting and tough, he has been trying to help Chloe turn her life around. He has his own struggles with PTSD and views Joyce, Chloe's mother, as a light in his life and wants from the start to help guide Chloe. Additionally, when Max sometimes expresses reluctance to do something Chloe wants, Chloe turns sullen and angry, lashing out at her erstwhile best friend. That is not to reason that Chloe's life is meaningless and that the player should throw her away out of hand—the final choice to save or sacrifice Chloe should have weight and meaning. However, it underscores that all of the people of Arcadia Bay—all of those innocent lives—should not be traded for Chloe's. If the player chooses to save Chloe, the game concludes with panning shots of the devastated Arcadia Bay and a brief scene of Chloe and Max driving out of town. While both appear shell-shocked and saddened, their ultimate action lies in moving away from the responsibility of Max's action. Tellingly, Chloe is literally and figuratively in

the driver's seat as they head out of town, with Max passive and quiet. While the two friends embark on new lives together, the player is left to wonder how long this blissful friendship will really last when tested. Chloe has changed marginally, but not fundamentally, and it is logical to assume that Chloe's problems will continue to surface, perhaps even drive a wedge between the two again. An older Max may then look upon the deaths she caused and regret. Since her power appears to have been eradicated upon her final choice, she will have to find a way to live with what she has done. The eighteen-year-old Max lacks the ability to contextualize the events and think that far ahead. On the contrary, the "Sacrifice Chloe" ending concludes with Chloe's funeral and a gathering of many of Arcadia Bay's citizens who come to say goodbye and to comfort Joyce. Although the event is somber, it ends with the blue butterfly returning one final time, flying over Chloe's casket, briefly alighting on it. Max notices it and clearly apprehends this as one final message from Chloe, if not the spirit of Chloe herself, and Max seems at peace, albeit saddened. This brings the narrative full circle in ways that the "Save Chloe" ending does not.

Telltale Games's *The Walking Dead* also features a high degree of choice centered on whether characters survive and how interpersonal relationships develop between groups of survivors. It has also been released episodically, to date, following a format of five episodes in each "season" of the game. So far, two seasons have been released and a third is planned, but this analysis will only be concerned with season one, which functions as a standalone, a complete narrative on its own. The game's setting parallels that of *The Walking Dead* television series, as both take place in Georgia and the character Glenn Rhee makes an appearance during Episode 1: "A New Day."[10] Otherwise, the remaining characters are original to the game. The player embodies Lee Everett, an African American man in his late thirties who has killed the man with whom his wife had been having an affair. Once the zombie infection and chaos begin to spread, he saves and takes as his own surrogate daughter an eight-year-old girl named Clementine. Her parents were away in Savannah at the time the outbreak began and have not been heard from in a while. While Clementine holds onto hope, Lee clearly understands that they died there. In Episode 5: "No Time Left," Clementine and Lee reach Savannah and discover her parents have turned into zombies. The game introduces a number of other characters throughout the five episodes, some of whom can be killed as a result of the player's choices. Aside from the player's choices leading to characters' deaths, the other choices make up the backbone of the game, shaping the narrative in myriad ways, from forming Clemetine's developing sense of morality to forging alliances with some characters at the expense of alienating others. The player's own individual choices and options, then, shape the narrative in both subtle and expansive ways. However, unlike some

of the other games discussed, Lee's actions do not function on a scale of good to evil. Instead, the game focuses on the impossible decisions that Lee has to make in a world that has fallen apart, such as whether to lie or tell the truth about his identity, or to keep food for himself rather than give it to others when supplies begin to run short. Toby Smethurst and Stef Craps argue "that it is these uniquely game-like qualities that enable *The Walking Dead* to represent trauma so compellingly by having the player interact with traumatized characters, by allowing them to virtually experience traumatizing situations, and by having them playthrough sequences in which they could potentially be viewed as the perpetrator of the trauma" (280). This becomes the central focus of the game, whose narrative remains almost completely unbroken by levity or humor. The player becomes the traumatized Lee, who has taken on himself the responsibility of caring for a child to whom he has no biological or legal obligations. Lee becomes wholly focused on Clementine's survival and on teaching her how to survive in a world containing dangers from both the zombies and other survivors.

Rather than emphasizing options creating large swaths of influence, like those in *Mass Effect*, *The Walking Dead* focuses instead on the thankless choices Lee must make at every turn to ensure Clementine's survival for one more day. The game frequently has moments in which the player must opt to take an action or to make a dialogue choice, but it does not signal when these choices may have a deeper effect on forthcoming events, with some having no real impact other than the immediate situation and others reverberating across several more episodes. The player is kept in a constant state of tension because the game immediately saves after every choice, precluding any ability to backtrack or to repeat a segment of the game, with the exception of starting the whole chapter over again.

With some choices, those with more lasting effects, the player receives an onscreen prompt signaling that the choice has created a lasting impact on the other character or characters involved in the scene, but without revealing what, precisely, that impact is. A primary example of this occurs when Lee and his group of survivors reach Hershel Greene's farm.[11] The player has a series of dialogue options with Hershel in which Lee can choose to lie—he had been in police custody when the zombie outbreak occurred and could be viewed as both dangerous and a fugitive from justice—or to be as honest as possible regarding his whereabouts prior to the outbreak and how he came to find Clementine. The player receives prompts at certain points that Hershel "took note" of certain details. If the player's story fails to add up—or just fails to make sense—Hershel challenges Lee for his dishonesty. While this does not impact the narrative as a whole, it is an early introduction to the player that other characters are not blind to what Lee says and does, as opposed to games in which NPCs fail to react in any significant way to anything the

player does. Clementine also begins to notice Lee's actions and words and sometimes questions him about his choices. Of Lee, Toby Smethurst and Stef Craps note, "Lee is not a typical video game protagonist (and not only because he is black—a rare thing for a game's main character). He is not a hero or a villain; he is not the one responsible for the zombie outbreak, nor will he be the one to contain it. He is a victim of circumstance: a relatively ordinary man moved by forces that are in no way under his control" (282). The player embodying Lee must negotiate an entire world that exists outside his control: even the other survivors with whom he has alliances have their own agendas and often create new problems for the group. The narrative immerses the player in the role of an Everyman—not a superhero, not someone with an arsenal of weapons—and a flawed one at that. The player cannot and does not find a way to cure the zombie infection, and characters in the game regularly die or betray the others. The concept of community collapses in the narrative, eventually narrowing until it becomes the quest of one man to protect one child. That being said, the choices the player makes do not always have a reverberating effect on the narrative as a whole. Some, indeed, may seem to have little immediate effect, save for their requirement that the player opts to behave in a certain fashion, whether through dialogue or through action. The player is asked to consider what choices he or she may make in the real world. Even though the game uses the fantasy setting of a zombie apocalypse, the choices and dangers faced by Lee and Clementine prove applicable to the real world and center on the code of morality an individual possesses and how that code evolves—for better or worse—in a situation in which daily survival becomes the sole focus of life.

The player may make choices that represent the potential to slip further and further from compassion and moral uprightness or those that chip away at Lee's sense of self, and even the player who attempts to make every morally upright choice in the game will be thwarted in that some scenarios lack any clear moral standing. Episode 3: "The Long Road Ahead" contains one such moment, as Lee and fellow survivor Kenny break into a pharmacy to obtain much needed medical supplies. The streets are littered with zombies, who are attracted to the noise and movement the pair creates when they enter the pharmacy. A lone female survivor is trapped by the increasing horde of zombies and screams in agonized terror. Lee wants to shoot her to spare her being eaten alive. There is, importantly, no way to save her—she has already suffered several bites by the time Lee and Kenny notice her. Kenny goads Lee against the action, arguing, "We're always worrying about the ones we can't see. She stays alive and brings them out of their holes." The horrible aspect of this decision is that while Kenny is very mercenary about keeping his immediate group of survivors alive, he is not wrong in his observations. They have limited weapons, and gunfire will draw the zombies, so they have a better chance

of finding the supplies they need if the zombies are drawn to the woman. The consequences of the player's choice occur shortly thereafter. If the player opted to shoot the woman, they are not able to gather many supplies before the zombies converge. If the player left her alive, they are able to obtain a great deal of necessary supplies before they have to flee. The key point to this choice lies in the player being unable to save the woman. It becomes a matter, on a very personal moral scale, of weighing her continued suffering against the group being in desperate need of supplies. The player must rationalize, given that the woman is doing to die in either case, what mode of death he or she can live with.

The final choice the player makes as Lee in the closing moments of the first season's final episode proves to be the most poignant. Early in the narrative of Episode 5: "No Time Left," Lee is bitten. By the end of the episode, he and Clementine finish the story much as they began it: alone in an unforgiving world. Lee nears death and knows he will reanimate. It is clear here that the narrative and all of its choices have been moving toward these last moments and Lee's final conversation with Clementine, and the narrative wisely opts not to have Lee's bite be a surprise sprung in the closing minutes of the episode. Instead, the focus lies in how the player embodying Lee will both face mortality and also prepare a child for life in a dangerous and amoral world. After she dispatches a zombie because Lee is incapacitated, the player can opt to tell Clementine, "See, you can take care of yourself." While these may be harsh words to say to a child, she takes them to heart, and the player is given the prompt that "Clementine will remember this." Although it is not in the scope of this analysis, it is important to note that Clementine will remember everything that Lee said and did, as she becomes the protagonist in the second season of the game. As their conversation continues, Lee can opt to ask Clementine to shoot him or tell her to leave him and flee. The choice is ultimately up to the player, and once again the choice circles back to whether the player is able to live with directing a child to shoot her surrogate father, the man who unfailingly protected her all this time. Yet all the narrative choices and roads in the game culminate here, in this relatively quiet and heartbreaking moment. The player, embodying Lee, has prepared Clementine, whether he or she realized it or not, for just this: life completely on her own with her sense of morality shaped by what she has witnessed Lee do. *The Walking Dead* does not hinge on set pieces filled with battles or sweeping locations. Instead, it focuses on the daily grind of life during the zombie apocalypse. It is a world that increasingly narrows from global concerns, to concerns about the community, to that of a group, and finally, to that of Lee trying to save the life of Clementine.

The final two games to be covered in this section are part of the genre known as the visual novel. While visual novels are certainly text heavy, they

rely equally on images—from the individual characters appearing onscreen to the background environments. This genre straddles the line between providing the player with some or very little agency and this can vary widely from title to title. For the two games considered here, the perhaps oddly titled *Steins;Gate* and *Norn9: Var Commons*,[12] the player is given sufficient agency and choice that they merit examination here. The visual novel, as a form of digital storytelling, occupies a complex space between the heavily choice-based and exploration-driven examples previously discussed here and those video games focused exclusively on narrative, with little choice to drive the storytelling. Given, though, that visual novels do focus on player engagement, such that he or she can impact various parts of the narrative, especially the ending, they warrant examination. The name "visual novel," although widely used to denote this particular form of gaming, fails to do the form complete justice. It implies a sense of player passivity that proves inaccurate. While the player has less to do in some sense than he or she may in a game in which a particular character is embodied and the player investigates different environments as a component of gameplay, he or she must still be actively engaged in the narrative. The player's agency as it relates to typical elements of the visual novel, which concentrate heavily on narrative choice and may also include puzzle solving or selecting from dialogue options, proves vital to the manner in which the branching narratives of the visual novel unfold. Further, as is a hallmark of digital storytelling, player input is always required. The player's active engagement is required to scroll through the text and make choices as is appropriate or needed. Dani Cavallaro notes, "As a form of interactive fiction, the visual novel overtly calls upon players to participate in the production of the text as integrated agents" (10). Her particular use of the word "interactive" provides a more accurate insight into the functioning of this genre than "visual" does. The digital stories explored in the visual novel form vary a great deal, as the two following examples demonstrate, however, they tend to be intensely character-driven stories.

Steins;Gate is a widely popular franchise in Japan, crossing into a number of different storytelling formats, including an anime series, manga, and video games. The video game released in 2015 crafts a unique method of interaction between player and text through the use of emails and messages. The story centers on Rintarou Okabe, who often goes by the nickname Okarin, and his group of misfit friends. They indulge in Okabe's self-aggrandizing delusions, including his assertions that he is being pursued by the evil Organization, and that he himself is part of a resistance/counter group with the motto El Psy Congroo, a nonsensical phrase he often utters. While Okabe possesses a brilliant scientific mind, he lacks, at the start, any real social skills that would enable him to form deeper bonds with those around him. As the story begins, Mayuri Siina, Okabe's childhood friend and potential love interest, seems to

be the anchor keeping Okabe conscious of others' feelings. Otherwise, he tends to bully his friends into doing what he wants, and it is only as the narrative unfolds that he develops a sense of appreciation for those around him. The rest of the plot takes on a distinctly science fiction tone and does well in moving the player away from Okabe's stranger and more paranoid musings, although whether he believes them or just needs to feel important remains unclear. At first, it appears that Okabe truly is delusional, as he has an incident early in the game that appears hallucinatory: people around him disappear, and no one else he encounters seems to notice anything out of the ordinary. As the story unfolds, Okabe discovers a power he deems, inexplicably, "reading Steiner" which allows him to notice small changes to the present reality. This dovetails with him and his friends discovering how to alter time through the combination of building a small time machine and using their cell phones to send special messages, called "D–Mails" in the game, which can alter the timeline by giving their past selves specific instructions or information allowing them to change the future.

Steins;Gate focuses on Okabe's desperate attempts to alter time to avoid both the death of some of those close to him and the coming of World War III, and with the player both embodying Okabe and sometimes questioning whether he is insane, the narrative maintains a sense of instability. Since his "reading Steiner" power allows only him the burden and ability to see the changes the group tries to effect on the past, Okabe must mature beyond the self-deluded, arrogant young man he is at the start of the story.[13] The game offers the player the possibility of reaching six different endings over the course of 10 chapters. However, the choices that trigger particular endings can also end the game prior to all 10 chapters being revealed. For example, the first of the endings, the one that arguably proves the easiest to achieve, happens in chapter 6 and concludes the game at that point. Other endings are possible in chapters 7, 8, and 10. Should the player successfully reach the final chapter, three endings are possible there. The game's narrative is constructed such that one ending is deemed the "true" ending, but that does not cheapen the other endings the player may achieve. Each ending makes complete narrative sense and provides a sense of unity to the story the player has created on a given playthrough.[14] Certainly, given the prospect of a more playable story, gamers gain incentive to replay the game more than once, as the player can view only one ending for each playthrough. Endings are not combined. Furthermore, the endings that conclude the game prior to the final chapter 10 present truncated ends to all of the main characters' stories, encouraging the player to move the narrative forward to its last stage.

The particular means by which the player makes various choices in the game provides a unique means of interaction between him or her and the digital narrative. Visual novels "prioritize the player's engagement with text

and static graphics over dynamic spectacle" (Cavallaro 11), and *Steins;Gate* explores this important concept through its use of text messaging as its visual interface through which the player engages with the story. Although the game features more typical dialogue scenes, the player, embodying Okabe, scrolls through these passages. The player's choices come in the form of text messages and phone calls that Okabe may choose to answer or not. As is the case with many choice-based games, the player has no way to gauge prior to having to make choices which of them will have a major impact on the narrative and the potential ending the player may reach, and which are interesting from a storytelling perspective but do not alter the overall narrative in more significant ways. Regarding the game's use of text messages, this proves a unique and compelling way in which to draw the player into the story and provides a meta-commentary on the overall use of technology as a means of communication on a macro-scale, with the player both utilizing technology to play the game and then interacting with technology in-game as an inherent part of its ludological structure. When Okabe receives a text message, the body of the message will contain just one word or phrases that are highlighted. The player then chooses from one of these highlighted options to continue the conversation. However, many of these options are devoid of any context, and the player is unable to see in advance how a given response to a message may correlate to Okabe's response to any given situation at hand. Furthermore, the responses the player chooses may not come to fruition in the narrative until much later. The path to the true ending is indicative of this complexity. The player must make the correct choices in a number of instances as far back as chapter 4 of the game. From a ludological, or gameplay mechanics, standpoint, a potential frustration with the game centers on a player's engaging in a first playthrough without knowing that multiple endings are possible, and then which specific narrative choices may trigger which ending.[15] Thus, the player might have only one save file and would have to restart the game, rather than having created multiple save files throughout the game, as would be ideal given the choice-heavy mechanics. *Steins;Gate* mitigates this potential frustration, however, by allowing the player to fast-forward through the game's story. Fast-forwarding automatically stops whenever a dialogue choice must be made, allowing for subsequent playthroughs that avoid becoming burdensome.

Although Okabe forges friendships with a number of different characters, *Steins;Gate* creates its most compelling conflict with the development of the relationship between Okabe and Mayuri. Mayuri, diminutive in size and firm in her belief in Okabe's innate goodness, first enters the narrative seeming immature and child-like, even though she is 16 years old at the start of the game. She is Okabe's closest friend, and while she at first appears to blindly go along with his delusions, it becomes clear that she realizes that most

of what he says is self-aggrandizement, but she plays along to avoid hurting him. She is also, in many ways, the moral heart of the story. Even when the group of friends comes under increasing mortal danger due to their attempts to prevent World War III and their tampering with time, she remains steadfastly loyal and upbeat and is far less world-weary that her companions. There is an option, as one of the endings, for Okabe to enter into a romantic relationship with Mayuri. Even though this is not the game's true ending, the option underscores Mayuri's central importance to the narrative. However, the central tension involving Mayuri centers on her death. As the group attempts to alter their timeline, they eventually reach a point where Mayuri is killed, murdered by those trying to stop the group. Okabe, horrified, reverses the timeline to a point before the killers break into their apartment. From that point on, he is continually forced to rewind the narrative to different points prior to Mayuri's original murder, yet to no avail. Mayuri continues to die, pointlessly and brutally, in a variety of ways, either at the hands of their enemies or through other means, such as slipping on a bullet train platform and being hit by an oncoming train. Okabe cannot accept that Mayuri is fated to die, in ways that parallel Max's inability initially to prevent Chloe's continued deaths in *Life Is Strange*, and makes one last desperate attempt to keep her alive. He moves backward through time again and takes the group on a bike ride. He then continuously loops this moment, these few hours where Mayuri remains alive and the friends are together.

This frozen few hours in time set up both Okabe's mental breakdown and a fascinating exploration of the performance of morally right actions in those moments where immoral actions would not be caught or punished. At first, Okabe revels in the simple joy of spending the day with his friends. Since he is the only one who can recognize altered timelines, each successive loop of the day feels original to his friends, and this creates an increasing sense of disconnection in Okabe. Nothing changes—not one minor detail. His friends say the exact same things at the exact same moments, leaving Okabe in increasing despair as he relives these events over and over again. It is important to note that the player does loop through the day with Okabe multiple times, but not as many as Okabe has experienced, and, eventually, Okabe appears to lose complete track of how many times he has gone back in time. Importantly, Okabe has one moment of agency directly impacting this timeline. On their bike ride, his friend Daru stops to rest and is nearly hit by a truck. Okabe pulls him to safety over and over again, but then begins to entertain darker thoughts. He muses, "What would happen if I didn't pull Daru's arm? Would the expected happen? Would this sloppy body of Daru's get caught in the truck's body and get sent flying like a rag doll? Would his head or arm get blown off and his crimson blood gush everywhere? Would Suzuha, Mayuri, and Kurisu scream after witnessing such an event? That

might be interesting too." By the time he muses in this manner, his words become more graphic, as does his seeming desire to break the monotony of the day and to satisfy his own darker moral imperatives. He reasons that he would simply rewind the timeline and nothing would change—Daru would start the bike ride alive again. Dale Miller and Benoit Monin argue that "To successfully maintain a positive moral self-image, people must both embrace moral opportunities when their self-images have been threatened and avoid failing moral tests" (41). It is the loss of this dual natured conception of morality that forces Okabe into a downward spiral. He has no one to answer to and, effectively, a "safe" system in which he can enact murder and brutality without consequences of any kind, either legal or in the form of reproach from his friends. As the never-changing days continue, Okabe's thoughts turn darker still, beyond just letting Daru get hit by a car. He envisions the possibilities of rape and murder, of being something of a god controlling the fates of everyone in the looped day. He muses in a conversation with himself, "Are those things really the evil you have in your heart, Okabe Rintarou? Hmm. That just shows how shallow humans like I[16] really are. Consider the following, Okabe Rintarou. Though you may have started it of your own volition, isn't this endless two-day loop torture? Aren't you slowly growing tired of it? In the confines of these two days, you don't need any boring, worthless things like etiquette, ethics, or laws."[17] Miller and Monin further reason that "The desire to avoid future moral tests can even lead people to shun moral opportunities if embracing them will sow the seeds for future moral tests" (43), which, importantly ceases to apply to Okabe so long as he continues to keep himself and his friends in a never-ending time loop. He need not worry about "moral tests" or about answering for his behavior.

Two important points emerge from this tense series of scenes. From a narrative perspective, Okabe eventually realizes, before acting on any of his dark desires, that keeping everyone stuck in one day does not provide a lasting solution and causes more harm than good. Not only has it caused his own mental state to fracture, but he has stolen agency from all of his friends. Finally, one of them, Suzuhua who is herself revealed a time traveler, senses what Okabe has done and confronts him. He confesses and opts to travel with Suzuhua further back in time to try to alter world events there, leading to one potential ending of the game. Okabe's willingness to save Mayuri another way, as opposed to keeping her in a type of permanent stasis, reflects an increasing level of maturity. He moves past his dark thoughts and the fantasy of a world without consequence and takes the harder and less certain route.

The second important focus to consider regarding the looping day reflects on the player's interaction with the visual novel during this sequence. He or she has no way of knowing how long the game will continue to replay

the sequence, creating an overall sense of tension. Furthermore, the player embodies Okabe and experiences the vile thoughts Okabe begins to have from his perspective. The player is placed in a position where he or she fears that Okabe may commit murder or some other atrocity, which would permanently shift his or her perceptions of the character being embodied, or that the player will eventually be forced to *choose to perform* such an action. The emotional release experienced when Okabe comes back to himself provides a compelling end to this section of the story. The visual novel form proves especially useful as a means for articulating this particular sequence of story. The artwork sequences for each bike ride remain the same, featuring his smiling friends. Only Okabe's dialogue, which the player moves through by prompting the next segment to appear, provides a break in the monotony, forcing the player to concentrate perhaps more fully on the dialogue than he or she might in a situation where more interaction and input is required.

While *Steins;Gate* possesses some elements of romance in its narrative, it keeps its concern on its larger and more complex time travel plot. *Norn9: Var Commons* belongs to a specific subset of visual novels designated as "otome." Toshi Nakamura notes, "In Japan, there is a genre of games specifically targeted at women. Called 'neo-romance games' or 'otome games' (maiden games), most are essentially harem romance stories with the genders reversed. But it wasn't always this way" (n.p.). In the otome story, also found in anime and manga, a young woman, or several young women in the case of this game, explore romance with a number of potential suitors. The player often has the opportunity to view each of the potential narrative branches related to each suitor and to each possible outcome of that particular romance. The otome games are marketed heavily toward female gamers, something generally uncommon with video game marketing. As of this writing, several game developers have invested in localizing otome games originally released only in Japan into English. These are relatively few in number compared with the large number of titles available to Japanese gamers.

While romance tends to be the main goal or outcome of the otome visual novel, this does not mean that its narrative is inferior to other visual novels, and many, such as *Norn9: Var Commons*, offer large narrative backdrops against which the romances emerge. However, the complicated and sometimes disturbing romantic entanglements forged among the three main heroines and a varied selection of potential male suitors remain the narrative focal point. To that end, from a storytelling perspective, the narrative proves to be shallower than the preceding examples, even that of *Steins;Gate*, which shares its designation as a visual novel. However, given the established popularity of this form in Japan and its increasing popularity in North America, the otome form merits investigation and it does not imply that a romance-

based narrative automatically presents a lesser plot than that of other story genres. Because "visual novels invite reflection on the relationship between the story dimension they articulate in order to proceed textually and the specifically ludic framework on which they depend for their gameplay" (Cavallaro 33), the game's interface also warrants examination. As is the case with the visual novel more generally, *Norn9: Var Commons* hinges on the player making dialogue and action selections at numerous points throughout the narrative. The player does not otherwise have any actions to complete, such as puzzles, combat, or even free exploration of an area, that are typical of most other genres of games. In this specific title, the player embodies three different characters, all female, and selects one of three male suitors for each of them.[18] For each of those potential romances, the game offers a "good" and a "bad" ending, meaning that to see all possible narrative permutations, the player must complete 18 different playthroughs. The game mechanics streamline the repetition in that the player can fast-forward through all previously seen moments, as is the case with *Stein's;Gate*. When the player makes responses to situations or to dialogue involving a given suitor, those choices directly affecting whether the good or bad endings will be achieved are signaled with a prompt indicating whether his affection went up or down.

The overall plot of *Norn9: Var Commons* focuses on the heroines and their love interests, most of whom are in their teens, with a few in their early twenties, being brought together aboard a massive, self-contained flying vessel, the Norn, to "save" innocent people from those who would kill them. In effect, this limited setting serves the romantic aims of the narrative in that it gathers nearly all the male love interests and all of the female protagonists in one centralized setting. They are offered no specificity in terms of what they are supposed to do and are awaiting orders from "The World," a group they initially believe to be a benevolent United Nations–type organization focused on stopping outbreaks of war. All the main characters possess a special ability or power they believe will be of use in these battles. For example, Nanami can erase memories. The group has been deceived, however, and their talents are to be utilized as part of a process meant to "Reset" the world. An artificial intelligence named Aion, masquerading as "The World," tries to follow her original orders to prevent war at all costs. The powers possessed by each of the main characters are extensions of Aion's powers, and each of them is required for a Reset. This involves, among other things, wiping the memories of humankind and then using the character with the pyrokinetic ability to scorch the entire planet.[19] The group believes the year to be 1919, but it is really 8075, with the first Reset having been performed in 2085. The central interpersonal tensions in the different storylines focus on the uncertainty of their situation and, later, on the moral conflict of performing the Reset. Aion has been degrading over time and can perform only this one

final Reset, but after every previous Reset, humans have inevitably warred with one another. In that sense, the game provides a somber exploration of the existence of violence, war, and atrocity and whether these traits are inherent to humanity.

Larger philosophical questions aside, *Norn9: Var Commons* otherwise remains focused on its exploration of romantic possibilities. These are, with little exception, relationships that inevitably fall into stereotypical categories. Each of the three female protagonists exists as a type. Nanami is guarded and emotionless, Mikoto focuses on her duty to The World, and Koharu, the youngest, is naïve and innocent. The romances they forge with their male counterparts fall into expected patterns. The male characters are also types, such as the seeming "bad guy" who really is a good guy, the possessive guy, the true "bad boy," and the like. While that renders the romances somewhat superficial overall, with none of them exploring the inner workings of a relationship to any true depth, the game's narrative hints at the understanding that its story follows well-trodden conventions. One of the centerpieces of the game, one that repeats in all of the scenarios and involves all three of the heroines, finds them transported into a fairy-tale world, courtesy of the power possessed by one of their group to keep people asleep and manipulate their dreams. Mikoto plays the role of Cinderella, Nanami plays Little Red Riding Hood, and Koharu is Snow White. Of note here is the use of recognized fairy tales in this section of the game. In each, certainly in their traditional versions, the focus is on the very real danger young women can face at the hands of men, whether they are suitors, husbands, or strangers. This signals to the player that many of the romances, often dysfunctional in their "bad" ending forms, are not to be taken as examples of healthy relationships. Instead, like the dream world inhabited by Mikoto, Nanami, and Koharu, they serve predominantly as entertainment and to provide the larger warning that women need to choose their romantic partners wisely.

The visual novel genre proves to be an evolving and unique form, and as more titles are localized into English, the Western gamer will enjoy the opportunity to explore more of these particular types of digital stories. The other examples in this section also featured player choice as a driver of story. These games vary significantly in terms of their genre, form, and thematic explorations, but all exemplify the short-form digital story as a place for daring, even controversial storytelling.

Narrative-Based, Small-Scale Games

The final category of storytelling to be considered contains those games that lack many of the traditional and more recognizable features of video

games, including those analyzed previously here. These elements typically include some combination of immersive exploring, engaging in combat, defeating enemies, making choices, and fully exploring the digital landscape. While those elements are frequently an inherent part of the gaming experience, they are not the only criteria by which meaningful storytelling happens in the digital environment. This category of games, then, is best deemed "narrative-based" as a means to separate it from its more interactive counterparts. These have sometimes been called visual novels, or, pejoratively, walking simulation games. Both of these terms prove wanting. Visual novels, as was discussed in the previous section, typically involve the reader to varying extents within the narrative's plot, even though visual novels as a whole are more text-heavy than other digital storytelling forms. Because the pejorative label "walking simulation" comes primarily from those who are unwilling to understand video games in a context other than "action heavy," the epithet can be wholly discarded. "Story exploration games" or "interactive story games" may be better terms. These games have no side quests and no shooting but may consist of moving the protagonist from one place to another within the digital environment as the sole means of progressing the story. Dan Pinchbeck, a producer for The Chinese Room, developer of games like *Dear Esther* and *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture*, asserts of this intimate form of storytelling, "I think it's a strength of a narrative to not have to join all the dots. The best books throw away ideas left right and center that you never find out more about. It creates a sense of scale and mystery" (n.p.). It does not stand to reason that stories that more clearly and overtly detail their plots lack strength. On the contrary, in consideration of the central role of the player in digital storytelling, the refusal of such a story to lead its reader down one simple path encourages not only engagement, but critical thought. The games in this final section all display the hallmarks of what Pinchbeck discusses in that either they remain shrouded in uncertainty, as is the case with *Dear Esther*, or they deliberately lead the reader down several opposing narrative threads, as is the case with *Gone Home*. *Kentucky Route Zero* anchors much of its core story in the heartbreak many American families experienced during and in the aftermath of the Great Recession, while also steeping its narrative in rich fantasy and lore. Finally, *Fingerbones*[20] forces the reader to explore a nightmarish story of a father who has done the unspeakable, but it leaves obscured the answers to the questions of why and what has happened to the world around him. Each of these titles offers the player a highly engaging narrative experience, even without the more expected elements found in other categories of games.

The titles in this section are all "indie games," meaning that they were developed by independent production companies and did not enjoy the support, and therefore the financial and advertising reach, of the larger AAA

companies, like Bethesda, Ubisoft, and 2K Games. Many of these independent production companies find financial support through crowdfunding sites, such as Kickstarter, creating an inherently intimate relationship between those who donate with the intention of becoming players and the developers themselves. Certainly, larger development companies can and do produce small-scale titles. However, because large-scale developers have created many of the titles discussed in this book, and given that this final section showcases the intimacy possible with digital storytelling, focusing here on the contributions of the indie developers to the medium provides a critical dimension. Mikhail Fiadotau explores this relationship between the indie game consumer and the game's developer by noting,

> By contrast, an indie game that takes 15 or 30 minutes to complete is little more than an idea; if the idea is given away before the game even starts, there is no reason for anyone to actually play it. And yet, a game with no description is also unlikely to receive attention: in all probability, there are many other games on the same portal that have attractive descriptions to appeal to the player. So the challenge to a developer of a small vignette-type game is that they have to persuade a potential player to play it without being too specific about the game itself [93].

He speaks specifically here about how these small-scale titles should be marketed to consumers, but his point has broader resonance. The indie title, especially those of very short length, such as *Fingerbones* and *Dear Esther*, indeed concentrate on an idea, but to state that they *only* focus on an idea sells short these more compact storytelling offerings.

Dear Esther begins with a core, accessible idea, though nonetheless a mysterious one, with a man reciting letters written to someone named Esther, whose relation to him and what has happened to her left murky. The easiest explanation is that she is his wife, she died in a car accident, and his letters are a means of maintaining a connection with her. A variant explanation for Esther's identity is that she is his child and died in the car accident, which also took the life of his wife. Evidence in the game exists, in this line of interpretation, for Esther being killed either in utero or as a child of perhaps five or six years old.[21] However, from that one central idea, the narrative branches off, like spokes on a wheel, into a complex treatise on mortality, guilt, and the possibility for redemption. The power of its storytelling lies not only in its exploration of one man's grief and mental unraveling but also in its use of interrelated, yet very different textual possibilities. The player, who sees the landscape—a desolate, beautiful island said to be located in the Hebrides—from the first-person perspective never knows precisely who he or she embodies. The most obvious possibility is that the player embodies the narrator who recites the letters to Esther at set points in the game, yet the player could also simply be a witness following in the footsteps of that narrator.

The player does not interact with the environment to further the story, rather the narrative is location-driven. The player's goal is to reach a far-off radio tower, and at set points along that journey, the game will automatically recite the next letter and display it onscreen. Given that the narrator's letters indicate his desire to somehow be unburdened of his guilt and to "reunite" with the dead Esther, and considering his specific description of the landscape around the player, a structurally sound conclusion is that the player embodies this narrator. However, given the ambiguity of the story, the player could be his or her own avatar in the game, exploring a landscape deeply scarred and haunted by the narrator's trauma. In that analysis, the player retraces the steps of the narrator as he moved across the landscape and eventually reached the top of the radio tower. Both analyses have equal merit in that the game's vague, yet beautiful, narration refuses to yield many concrete details. On the one hand, the landscape, at the time the player explores it, is already covered in chemical symbols and biblical excerpts with references to Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus, leading to the conclusion that the narrator has already made his way through the area and is long quit of it. However, it proves just as reasonable to conclude, considering the narrator's increasingly frenzied narration, that although he has traversed the island numerous times already, he has finally found the courage and conviction to reach the radio tower with its beckoning light, which represents his chance at atonement and peace.

The use of the natural landscape as the primary setting for the game proves important in constructing its themes of loss and salvation. The player never encounters another being during the game, save for a couple of instances where black, spectral figures are seen far from the player. These are not menacing ghosts or poltergeists but would logically seem to be manifestations of Esther, guiding the narrator closer to the beacon. The landscape, while barren and desolate, provides a stunning and breathtaking backdrop against which the narrator's letters are recited and read by the player on screen. Daniel Reynolds argues of the first-person protagonist embodied by the player in the game that "*Dear Esther* makes use of the Romantic figure of the landscape as an emotive counterpoint to the agonized letters that its narrator composes" (49). The landscape here appears foreboding as the player traverses pathways overgrown with grass and marked by precipitous drops but never holds a sense of menace, rather one of melancholy, in line with the Romantic emphasis on the power and beauty of the sublime in nature and its redemptive possibilities. Once the player reaches a system of subterranean caves, filled with bioluminescent life and vibrant shades of blues, reds, and greens, the landscape evolves into something sacred and ineffable. This evolving landscape provides the crucial visual backdrop needed for the player to experience *Dear Esther*'s story.

First, it is important to note that *Dear Esther* does not rely on the player's choices or his or her interactions with the game environment for the narrative to proceed. The narration and text will begin to play at set points that the player reaches while traversing the island. The controls available to the player are easy to learn and are only related to the direction in which the player wishes to move. Technically, the player can "die" by falling into a large chasm that must instead be carefully circumvented.[22] However, there are no penalties for this, and the player can simply resume play at a point just before this area. The game instead focuses on making the player's exploration of the island of primary importance and facilitates this through a simplified set of controls. That exploration becomes of paramount importance, given how the game's story unfolds when the player reaches set points within the landscape. To that end, there are instances in which the player can explore more of the island than is strictly necessary to follow a straightforward path to reach the radio tower. In so doing, the player not only engages with more of the physical environment of the game but also has the opportunity to hear textual options within that given playthrough.

Dear Esther's automatic triggering of the game's script is not an indication of a passive gaming experience. By its very nature, gaming can never truly be passive, and while *Dear Esther* lacks the more complex forms of gameplay found in many other titles, it requires a high level of engagement and attention from the player. The player can—indeed must—pay attention to items in the environment, even though these are not items with which the player can interact or manipulate. One crucial example of this has the ability, whether it is observed or missed, to drastically shift the player's interpretation of the story. The player comes upon an abandoned house and can explore its interior. On a table lies a copy of a sonogram, a discovery which gives clarity to the narrator's references to a child and the later discovery of a little girl's photograph. The discovery of this image deepens the narrator's suffering because it gives more weight to the interpretation that the narrator lost a child. The landscape is, throughout the game, littered with the detritus of burned out and rusted car parts, which in their totality add weight to the narrator's overwhelming sense of guilt and suffering about the fatal car wreck that killed Esther.

The nature of *Dear Esther*'s story and how the player pieces it together provides an important insight into both the particular form this digital story takes and how that form intersects with its themes to create meaning. *Dear Esther*'s game script totals approximately 7,800 words, the equivalent of a short story of about 30 pages in a double-spaced format, giving it more than adequate length to explore a complex set of thematic issues. However, the game does not present the player with all of these textual possibilities on his or her initial playthrough. The game, as described previously, has set "trigger points," where the narrator's next letter to Esther will automatically be recited

and show onscreen. At each of these trigger points, several different textual options are possible. Hundreds of narrative permutations, therefore, exist. While are all thematically similar and cohesive in terms of exploring the story's overall theme of redemption, the textual nuances provide a fascinating *series* of narratives along the trajectory of this one theme. The voice-over actor brings particular life to the dense and often bewildering sections of text. His particular vocal register, sometimes calm and wistful, other times frantic and fraught with near madness, bring the story to life more fully than if the words were simply presented on screen. Toby Smethurst argues of games like *Dear Esther* that feature working through trauma as their core narrative drive, "The feelings of disembeddedness, isolation, and the randomness and meaninglessness of injury and death are key markers of trauma and the modernity from which it arises" (823). It is with this last point that *Dear Esther*'s particular blending of landscape and narration is found at its most powerful. It is illustrated most powerfully with a scene that causes the player to question what is real. The player, deep within the game's underground cave system, must jump down a significant distance into a body of water at the base of a subterranean waterfall. As he or she breaks the surface, reality blurs, and the player descends to an underwater re-creation of the highway accident that killed Esther. The sounds of the accident are distorted because of the water, but the player periodically hears a turn signal indicator that appears to be stuck on and distant sirens throughout the sequence. The player explores this alien landscape, never certain if he or she has entered the narrator's increasingly frenzied mind, alone in a scene that brought such sorrow into his life. The narrator's trauma becomes, in profound ways due to the game's use of first-person exploration, the player's own.

The opening monologue possibilities for *Dear Esther* hint at its narrative complexity with regard to the options existing at each narrative juncture. The game starts by coming into focus, out of darkness, with the player staring out over the ocean from the bottom of a boat ramp. A lighthouse looms behind the player as soon as he or she turns around, away from the water. The game immediately begins with one of following four openings:

> Dear Esther. I sometimes feel as if I've given birth to this island. Somewhere, between the longitude and latitude, a split opened up and it beached remotely here. No matter how hard I correlate, it remains a singularity, an alpha point in my life that refuses all hypothesis. I return each time leaving fresh markers that I hope, in the full glare of my hopelessness, will have blossomed into fresh insight in the interim.
>
> Dear Esther. The gulls do not land here anymore; I've noticed that this year they seem to have shunned this place. Perhaps it's the depletion of the fishing stock driving them away. Perhaps it's me. When he first landed here, Donnelly wrote that the herds were sickly and their shepherds the lowest of the miserable classes that populate these Hebridean islands. Three hundred years later, even they have departed.

> Dear Esther. I have lost track of how long I have been here, and how many visits I have made overall. Certainly, the landmarks are now so familiar to me that I have to remind myself to actually see the forms and shapes in front of me. I could stumble blind across these rocks, the edges of these precipices, without fear of missing my step and plummeting down to sea. Besides, I have always considered that if one is to fall, it is critical to keep one's eyes firmly open.
>
> Dear Esther. The morning after I was washed ashore, salt in my ears, sand in my mouth and the waves always at my ankles, I felt as though everything had conspired to this one last shipwreck. I remembered nothing but water, stones in my belly and my shoes threatening to drag me under to where only the most listless of creatures swim.

These openings occur randomly, meaning that the player may have to play the game more than four times before he or she encounters all four variations of the opening monologue. In terms of textual analysis, several key elements present themselves in the four variant openings. The opening letter referencing Donnelly, supposedly an explorer of the Hebrides islands, appears at first to be the most thematically dissimilar from the rest, because the narrator references a third party and the changing nature of the island itself. Closer consideration, however, reveals that this letter, along with others in the game also chronicling Donnelly's exploration of the island, speak to two possibilities. The first is the narrator's tendency to abstract himself from the immediacy of his experiences, which becomes most obvious in those readings that hint at the possibility that he was the driver responsible for the fatal accident, but he can't quite admit it. The Donnelly opening also focuses attention on the idea of decay, as Donnelly found the island to be in a drastically diminished state. The narrator himself is in a state of increasing mental decay, which becomes more prominent the closer he gets to the beacon. He also claims, but it is impossible to verify the veracity of the claim, that he is suffering from an infected injury to one of his legs, sustained when he fell while exploring the island's cave system. As the infection consumes him and he has no method left to keep the infection at bay, his physical state mirrors that of the island as Donnelly found it.

The other three textual variants have more obvious thematic continuity among them. The first letter opens with the telling phrase "given birth." While the narrator is male, this specific word choice speaks to later textual and visual clues pointing to the loss of a child in the accident. The womb-like caves the player explores late in the game provide the physical correlation to the words spoken at the start. They are also unspeakably lovely to explore, providing the most consistent use of vibrant color found in the game. Dan Pinchbeck, one of the producers of *Dear Esther*, notes of the use of the cave sequences in the game,

> A key location in the game that makes this more explicit is the caves level. The caves were originally designed to provide a break in tone and space from the open levels in

> the beginning, though they also served as a device that let us move the time of day radically from afternoon to night. Once the player enters the caves, the game breaks away from reality in a very obvious way, synchronizing with the voice-overs shift in tone to something more fragmented and confused. Rob created areas in the caves that were highly suggestive and deeply unreal, such as a heart-shaped cave lit orange and pink, in order to evoke an emotional response from the player [n.p.].

Certainly, the caves, which provide the player with the most varied and active exploration, also immerse him or her in the hyper-real. In the caves, the player not only traverses these areas but must also fall into and swim through bodies of water as a part of the journey. Here, the idea of redemption, symbolically represented through a series of natural baptisms in this environment, ties visually to the start of the game. The third variant finds the narrator stating in part, "I have always considered that if one is to fall, it is critical to keep one's eyes firmly open." This ties in to the game's overall goal of reaching the radio tower, which represents the final moments of the game and will be considered more closely later in the analysis. The fourth and final variant contains the phrasing that the narrator washed ashore on the island and awoke to the taste of "sand in my mouth," which serves as a euphemism for the narrator's possible alcoholism or his disgust over the drunk driver who caused the accident. The alcohol would provide no real satiation of thirst and becomes its own terrible addictive hunger in this case. Although the four possible starting points to the game set different tones and start the player in different narrative places, each, ingeniously, builds the narrative to a unified whole.

Although the variations in the text can shift the narrative's possible interpretations, several important symbolic details remain constant in the environment across all possibilities. The first relates to the molecular formula found painted with increasing frequency as the player transverses the island and the subterranean cave system. The molecular formula for alcohol appears at the start of the game, in the lighthouse, which is the first area the player can choose to explore. It then appears sporadically throughout the remainder of the game. The symbol for dopamine emerges frequently as well, and although other chemical symbols appear in the game, namely, one related to phosphorescence and a drug used to treat acid reflux, it is the appearance of alcohol and dopamine that prove thematically important, even though the other two also relate to elements of the story. *Dear Esther* holds consistently to one tragic event in the narrator's life across the textual permutations: the death of Esther in a car accident caused by a drunk driver. The role of alcohol as an addictive substance focuses attention on the repeated and increasingly frantic scrawling of the symbol for dopamine across the island. As Magdalena Uhart and Gary Wand discuss in their research findings, dopamine plays a role in both addiction and in the conflation of addiction and stress (49–51). Dopamine is also associated with the more generalized concept of "pleasure,"

and, here, current research informs the complexity of the symbol's use in the game. At the point of addiction, an addict is unlikely to state that he or she feels "pleasure" from the drug, as it has evolved beyond that into a craving that must be sated for that person to function. While a drunk driver is clearly responsible for the crash that killed Esther, and possibly others, the textual variations in the game alternatively attribute blame to either a man named Paul or to the narrator himself.[23] Indeed, in some configurations, the narrator may very well be Paul, who has abstracted himself into the third person due to guilt. The confluence of both guilt and alcohol addiction find voice in the landscape via the dopamine symbol. The narrator feels a terrible guilt about the accident, whether he is the perpetrator or a survivor of the event, and speaks either explicitly or implicitly of his problem with alcohol. The entire journey across the unnamed island is itself an attempt to exorcise the narrator's grief as he moves closer to the radio beacon/transmission tower, the player's ultimate goal. As the player gets closer to the beacon, the narrator becomes increasingly frenzied and unhinged, sometimes ceasing to make sense at all and at other times likening himself to Paul on the road to Damascus. Most players would not know what the chemical symbols represent upon first playing the game, and this point highlights the manner in which a narrative like *Dear Esther* demands the attention and care of its player. The player could opt not to research the chemical symbols, but in so doing, the textual richness of the story is diminished. The visual and aural clues in the landscape form just as much of the plot as the varied textual permutations. Finally, the game's soundtrack, a mixture of ambient environmental noise and an evocative piano score at times plaintive, contemplative, and soaring, provides an additional element of aural immersion.

The game's varied and interlocking textual threads culminate the haunting climax, which finds the player finally at the radio tower. At this point, the game's final segment unfolds as a cut scene in which the player's avatar climbs to the top of the radio tower and jumps. Two textual possibilities exist for the game's final letter:

> Dear Esther. I have burnt my belongings, my books, this death certificate. Mine will be written all across this island. Who was Jakobson, who remembers him? Donnelly has written of him, but who was Donnelly, who remembers him? I have painted, carved, hewn, scored into this space all that I could draw from him. There will be another to these shores to remember me. I will rise from the ocean like an island without bottom, come together like a stone, become an aerial, a beacon that they will not forget you. We have always been drawn here: one day the gulls will return and nest in our bones and our history. I will look to my left and see Esther Donnelly, flying beside me. I will look to my right and see Paul Jakobson, flying beside me. They will leave white lines carved into the air to reach the mainland, where help will be sent.

> Dear Esther. I have burned the cliffs of Damascus, I have drunk deep of it. My heart is my leg and a black line etched on the paper all along this boat without a bottom. You are all the world like a nest to me, in which eggs unbroken form like fossils, come together, shatter and send small black flowers to the very air. From this infection, hope. From this island, flight. From this grief, love. Come back! Come back…

While both are punctuated with grief and melancholy, each serves to end the game on a redemptive, even hopeful note. The first speaks more explicitly of the events related to the car accident. Some textual passages make the driver's identity more ambiguous, sometimes pointing toward the narrator himself, but the accident always involves a man named Paul Jakobson as the party in the other car. His reference here to Esther proves more fascinating. He has spoken, throughout the narrative, of wanting to be with her again and also to make peace with her violent death. Here, he imagines himself reunited with Esther, presumably then free of his guilt and rage, yet also perhaps able to forgive Paul. The second narrative possibility speaks of a chance for redemption, still tempered by the grief of loss as he begs Esther to "come back." The references to a nest and eggs circle back to the theories that either Esther is the narrator's child or that Esther was pregnant and lost their child in the accident. In the game's final moments, after the letter is read and the player's avatar jumps off the tower, he or she floats over the island instead of plummeting. The scene is surreal and lovely, as the avatar, floating ghost-like across the shoreline, passes over the image of a fleet of paper boats heading across the water to the horizon. Throughout the game, the narrator has made reference to himself feeling like a "boat without a bottom," adrift and lost. Here, the boats begin a journey on the water, and the player experiences a powerful sense of finding the way to redemption.

As in *Dear Esther*, *Kentucky Route Zero* focuses on a troubled protagonist but is combined with a broader exploration of America both during and after the Great Recession. *Kentucky Route Zero* was planned as a total of five "acts," with the release of its first act in 2013. However, after the release of the first two acts, the game experienced a long delay from the release of Act 3 in May 2014 to that of Act 4 in July 2016. As of the writing of this book, the game's developer had not set a firm release date for the fifth and final act, indicating only that it would likely be a year or more after Act 4. Such slow release dates are indicative of the challenges small indie developers, such as the three-person development company Cardboard Computer, face when producing and releasing content. Unfortunately, the long lag times between acts and tenuous release dates may well encourage gamers to avoid *Kentucky Route Zero* until or unless it is finished and that would be a shame.

The game is a poignant, melancholy, beautifully rendered exploration of American life in the wake of the Great Recession, and its ties to *The Odyssey* remind the player that "home" is not so easily reached. The narrative provides

a brilliant illustration of how magical realism, the use of fantastical elements seamlessly blended with those from the real world, can be utilized to tell a story. In the case of *Kentucky Route Zero*, the story never makes clear what year it is, and the only geographical marker lies in the game's title. The game begins in Kentucky with the protagonist, Conway, needing to make a delivery to 5 Dogwood Drive, a location reachable only via the use of the mysterious "Route Zero." From there, the narrative seamlessly fuses the real and recognizable, as in the case of a bureaucratic nightmare of an office building, with what is hauntingly magical, as in the case of Julian, a massive bird who is the "brother" of a young human boy named Ezra whose family lost their home to foreclosure. The player ostensibly follows the story of Conway on his quest first to find access to Route Zero, but the narrative opens up to include the lives of those Conway meets on his journey. The player does not embody only one character but switches among the game's main characters, sometimes even within the course of a single scene or section of dialogue, finding the player first embodying one character, then another, as he or she makes dialogue selections to further the story. The game is seen in the third-person perspective but uniquely so in that it does not conform to the usual format of the player's gaze being set behind and slightly above the character he or she controls. The game's "eye" looks on much of the game, especially in Act 4, as though the player were seated in a theater watching the events unfold on stage. The game's theatricality lends it a further sense of the surreal, as buildings "open up" in a fashion analogous to how stage scenes may be set and revealed to the audience. Tamas Kemenczy, one of the game's developers, noted of this specific stylistic choice, "Visually, it's very sparse and minimalistic. One of our goals is to give the game a stage-like appearance, a fantastical appearance with the lighting and everything. Even the dialogue looks like it's from the manuscript of a stage play" ("No Guns" 7). The resulting narrative becomes, complexly, one in which the player is both embodied within the game's many characters and externally situated outside the narrative.

Kentucky Route Zero offers the player a simplified set of controls, similar to those used in visual novels and *Dear Esther*, such that the player points and clicks his or her mouse to move characters to various locations or to select dialogue options. The dialogue options do not lead to different game endings, even when they appear to be choice-based. However, the variations offered to the player serve two important functions: they allow the player to fundamentally shape the game's characters and to decide which actions to take or which characters to embody at various points throughout the story. Lindsey Joyce considers *Kentucky Route Zero*'s replay value and the different dialogue possibilities by noting, "A new story experience is constructed with each playthrough, provided that players alter their dialogue choices in subsequent playthroughs" (25). An early scene in Act 1 illustrates the fundamental

hand the player has in developing individual characters within the parameters of the larger, set narrative. Conway goes to the home of Weaver and helps her to set up a television. When the TV does not work, she questions his ability and asks him, "Which of your parents was it who wouldn't allow you to watch the television?" and the player can have Conway respond in one of three ways. Each response shows onscreen as a shortened version of the dialogue unfolding after the player's selection, so the player takes some risk in opting for dialogue he or she cannot view in full. The choices are: "Ma thought she heard ghosts in the static," "Dad thought it was radioactive," or "I know how to set up a TV." Each choice creates a different mood for the scene and a different Conway. The first conjures the overall sense of melancholy and of being haunted, literally and figuratively, as are the characters in the game and Route Zero itself. The second evokes more of a sense of humor from Conway. The final, tersest option creates a more confrontational Conway. If the player selects the last option, Weaver proves equally terse and responds, "OK. I'm skeptical."

Kentucky Route Zero often offers players ranges of choices precisely such as these, each of which shapes a given character in a particular way: more hopeful or downcast or contemplative. The player can also choose which scenes to play within the game in those instances where groups of characters are split up, or when one character can opt from several possible actions. In Act 4, which moves the location of the game from Route Zero to the Echo River and the tugboat *Mucky Mammoth*, a location still outside of the boundaries of the real world, the game affords the player many such opportunities to choose what characters do. At one point, *Mucky Mammoth* docks at a floating gas station. The player, embodying the boy Ezra, has two options presented in this way: "Ezra stayed on the tugboat and looked around the map room," or "Ezra followed Junebug and Johnny into the gas station." The player can only select one option here, that is, no option will appear later in the scene for the activity not chosen, so the player must start a new playthrough to see how the other narrative thread unfolds.[24] Each option allows the player insight into one set of characters over another, or perhaps to explore one location over the other. In a larger sense, each choice also adds to the overall power given the player to shape characters within the game. For example, an Ezra who chooses to stay on the boat and explore the map room may be seen as more introverted, perhaps afraid, perhaps intrigued by the idea of finding a treasure map. An Ezra who instead travels to the gas station may be viewed as having a stronger bond to Junebug and Johnny, or as simply more curious about the surreal environment of Echo River. James Perkins argues, "The game's fusion, then, of interactive elements of avant-garde theatre, challenges the readers to pay attention, alienating them from their own experience of playing a game–forcing them to consider not only the message, but the

medium itself" (n.p.). Perkins here describes the idea of "alienation" in the sense that the choices and the evocative environment allow the player to transcend the strict boundaries keeping the player firmly in mind that he or she is playing a game. Instead, the player engages with the narrative itself on a deeper level.

Aside from the player needing to select dialogue and actions throughout the game, he or she does not have to master any intricate use of controls. The most complex navigation in the game occurs once Conway locates Route Zero and focuses on the interpretation of symbols and the unique geography of the Zero rather than on mechanical complexity. Instead of functioning as a normal freeway, Route Zero consists of a circular pathway marked by different pictograms. To reach specific locations, players have to move forward or backward from one pictogram to the next. If the player becomes frustrated with the navigation, the game provides a help file with the sites of all needed locations. This highlights the purpose of *Kentucky Route Zero*: to immerse rather than to frustrate. Naomi Alderman expresses her impressions of the game, noting, "It has that feeling—rare in the arts, and even rarer in games—of being entirely *sui generis*, neither a piece in the tradition of what went before, nor an overly rebellious response to previous 'mistakes' or lacunae. It's just itself. It is good" (n.p.). Indeed, the game's narrative, while figuratively exploring an American society ravaged by the recession, does so in ways that harken back to the Homeric epics without feeling like a remake or even a reimagining. Instead, these elements serve as a reminder that all lives are, in their own way, both tragic and epic, and the intense small human dramas, as explored in the narrative, make up what is most compelling and heartbreaking about life.

Kentucky Route Zero begins with connections to *The Odyssey* and focuses the player on the idea of a journey home. The player embodies Conway during this first section of the game, and he or she is first tasked with naming his dog. The two choices are Homer and Blue. In this same scene, which takes place at the Equus Oils gas station, Joseph, its blind employee, indicates he has an "advanced degree" and demurs, during a conversation with Conway about the sunset, that the latter is surely "more of a poet than old Joseph!" Later, an owl randomly makes an appearance in the game, as a nod to Athena, Odysseus's staunch ally. Finally, more ephemeral references to both the Homeric epics and Greek mythology generally punctuate the story, from the character Weaver, an analogue to Clotho, who is one of the three Fates and tasked with weaving the thread of each mortal's life, to Echo River being evocative of the river Styx. Their appearances throughout the story highlight the overarching theme of the game: Conway is trying to find his way home. In the story, this is not literal. Conway is trying to find Dogwood Drive so he can make his delivery, and this provides the impetus for the unfolding

adventures on Route Zero and Echo River, but "home" in a symbolic sense looms large in his life. He reveals relatively little about his past, but the player learns that he has battled alcoholism, a battle he loses by Act 4 of the game. His alcoholism inadvertently leads to the death of Lysette's son, Charlie, which still mires him in guilt and grief. Conway was supposed to have gone out on a roofing job with Lysette's husband, Ira, but he was too hungover. Charlie went in his stead and died after falling from the roof. Conway tries to forge ties to others, evidenced by a tentative relationship he builds with Weaver's sister Shannon, but Act 4 ends on a darker note. Conway ends up effectively as slave labor for the Hard Times distillery, and in his last appearance in Act 4, he is ferried away by other employees, presumably back to the factory. While the ultimate resolution of Conway's character remains to be seen, the story as a whole likens him to Odysseus in that he is a man burdened by suffering and in search of his own concept of home and family. In a more ephemeral sense, *Kentucky Route Zero* also tells the story of the Everyman or Everywoman American struggling to return to a sense of normalcy—a sense of home—in the aftermath of the Great Recession.

The game's exploration of economic hardship provides the fundamental backbone to all the other narrative events. Lewis Gordon notes of *Kentucky Route Zero*'s investigation of this issue, "Money, then, matters. Or rather, the lack of it does. Conway's antique business is on its last legs; the farm of Weaver's parents was repossessed due to debt repayment issues; and the lease on Shannon's TV repair workshop was suspended. Despite the surreal and often fantastical flourishes that emerge throughout the game, it's still rooted in the seemingly mundane struggles we all experience" (n.p.). The game's narrative explores this in two primary ways. The first relates to the player's overall exploration of both Route Zero and the real world's mundane highway system of Kentucky that he or she can travel before finding Route Zero. Especially with regard to the latter, many of the locations that the player can explore are abandoned, including businesses and churches. One eerie moment in this exploration finds the player at one such abandoned church, from which recorded hymns play to empty rows of pews. A similar location along Route Zero, the Random Access Self-Storage Facility, features a recorded Mass being played to no congregation. The narrative here does not seem to be making a larger commentary on religion, save to present the idea that many people during the recession lost all hope, including hope derived from religion. While some locations on the freeway system are inhabited, most seem given over to desolation.

The persistent theme of people in the game losing their homes provides the most overt parallel to America's own foreclosure crisis over the last several years. Pam Bennett argues, "Widely held as a primary factor in the December 2007–June 2009 recession, the housing market has experienced massive home

foreclosures. From January 2007 to December 2011 there were more than four million completed foreclosures and more than 8.2 million foreclosure starts" (n.p.). These numbers are staggering enough, but do not take into account the homes that banks are holding on to, to avoid deeper losses. As more homes come into the official foreclosure process, the numbers will trend higher. Certainly, processing the emotional toll of eight million plus foreclosures would prove a challenge to many—the numbers are powerful, yet abstracted from an individual's own relatable experience. *Kentucky Route Zero* creates an intimate exploration of the direct impact that foreclosure and the loss of a home create. The first example centers on Weaver, whose family owns—at least for the moment—a simple farm and some land. Weaver comments on being "quite underwater" with the mortgage, and the player concludes, given that Weaver ultimately "disappears" from the location, that this is symbolic of her ultimate loss of the family home.[25]

The most powerful exploration of America's financial collapse and its effects on housing occurs in Act 2. The Bureau of Reclaimed Spaces and the Museum of Dwellings serve as stark symbols of loss and bureaucracy. The Bureau of Reclaimed Spaces keeps detailed records related to its activities, but makes it almost impossible for anyone on the outside to track what they have done. When Conway and Shannon are forced to navigate its several floors of cubicles and required forms, they come to a floor inexplicably inhabited by bears. No one in the Bureau finds this alarming or odd, and no real explanation for their presence is given. However, the Bureau's overall purpose lies in keeping massive archives of addresses and locations and, seemingly only at its discretion, "repurposing" these for other needs as it sees fit. This makes the Bureau something of an eminent domain factory, as it can seize any property it wants. The bears, perhaps, had to be relocated from their habitat when it was repurposed for development. Shannon comments of the Bureau, "too much concrete," and the unstated half of her expression may be "and too little heart."

The matter of what happens to humans whose land and homes are repurposed is brought into stark light at the Museum of Dwellings, which has previously been the site of a residential neighborhood. Absurdly, a neighborhood of sorts still exists in the Museum of Dwellings, but it stands as a tragic reflection of its counterpart. Throughout the museum are myriad styles of American homes, all of them familiar, all of them recalling the idea of the American Dream and the white picket fence. Some of the homes are occupied, presumably by their owners, but now they are relegated to the sterile environment of the museum. Conway and Shannon are free to explore the museum and talk to some of its denizens, who report neighborhoods having been "leveled," but who, for the most part, remain tight-lipped in the pair's presence. Indeed, the museum's staff, which has been monitoring Conway and Shannon all

along, seems threatened by their exploration of the museum and is concerned about what its residents may have told them about their circumstances. Ezra, a young orphan living in the museum, reveals to them, "My folks had a really nice house, bigger than any of these houses. But it made them worried all the time. Then the bank took it back."[26] Ezra and his brother Julian have a very specific mission in the museum. Every night, Julian flies the houses out of the museum and into the forest because the residents do not like sleeping in the museum. The museum represents the loss of the American dream for so many, and somberly hints that it may not exist any longer, save as displays found in a moldering museum. The denizens themselves seem resigned to what has happened, most likely because their alternative would be homelessness. Their only reprieve from this sense of helplessness lies in their nightly chance to live "normally" in a house out in the world, not locked away as an exhibit of a life lost forever.

Intertwined with the game's exploration of debt and losing everything is an examination of America's failing healthcare system, even in the wake of the Affordable Care Act. The first example focuses on Conway's employer, Lisette. She does not appear directly as a character but rather through flashbacks that Conway has at various points. The delivery he is making to Dogwood Drive is his last one, as Lisette is closing down her antiques business. The reason for that proves somber. Act 3 begins with an extended flashback and a conversation between Conway and Lisette. It is one of the only scenes in the game, at least up through Act 4, featured in full daylight. The pair sits at a kitchen table and chats, a scene that unfolds countless times across the world. Here, though, their topic is stark. While the narrative does not explicitly say so, the strong implication is that Lisette is in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease. She comments to Conway, "It seems inevitable that there will start to be words that I lose forever." The player learns that Cora, Lisette's daughter, will soon be taking Lisette somewhere else—presumably to some sort of a managed care facility. While this certainly can prove to be a necessity for a person in the latter stages of Alzheimer's disease, there is great tragedy in the image of Lisette, straddling the line between having and starting to lose her faculties. Further, the issue of how her care may be paid for looms over the narrative. Cynthia Ramnarace writing for AARP notes of a specific member's financial hardship, "Medicare didn't cover the $108,000-a-year cost of the locked memory-care facility that doctors told McCormack her mother needed to ensure her safety right after the diagnosis. And it didn't cover the $84,000-a-year assisted living facility that Helen lived in for three years after that" (n.p.). She further explains, "The average cost of care for an Alzheimer's patient is $56,800 per year. Sixty percent of that average cost—$34,500 per year—is covered by caregivers and the rest of the family themselves. The bulk of this is in the form of uncompensated care, but the out-of-pocket costs to

the family add up—an average of $7,259 per year" (n.p.). The figures are startling and would devastate many families needing to fund the long-term care of a loved one with advanced Alzheimer's disease. Lisette is at the start of that journey, and for her and her family, there will be no coming home again.

Conway's navigation of the healthcare system provides the final example. In Act 1, he severely injures his leg while he and Shannon explore the abandoned Elkhorn Mine. Finally, at the end of Act 2 and into Act 3, he finds Dr. Truman, seemingly the only doctor to be found, and receives treatment. When he awakes, he finds that his leg has been replaced by a mechanical one. The leg glows, constantly drawing attention to both its nature being alien to his body and its physical cost. Dr. Truman, kind enough but businesslike, immediately begins to talk to Conway about "the terms of his bill." He sympathizes to some extent, speaking of his own massive medical school debt, but is clear that Conway must repay the cost of his leg to the Consolidated Power Company. Lewis Gordon asserts, "It transpires that the pharmaceutical company is owned by the Consolidated Power Company. It's a banal detail but perceptive, pointing towards a corporate coercion that governs healthcare and energy supply in the States" (n.p.). Indeed, it seems clear that the debt is engineered such that Conway, or any patient, could never hope to pay it off. The narrative offers no clever solutions to the issue and does not try. Instead, it presents the reality that many Americans shoulder the burden of medical expenses they cannot ever possibly hope to pay. Even in the surreal world of Route Zero, corporate interests assert their grip. Where Act 5 of the game will ultimately take the player remains unknown, but it seems certain that the narrative will maintain its close focus on identity and an American sense of self.

Gone Home, unlike games such as *Dear Esther* or *Kentucky Route Zero*, roots itself firmly in the real and the fully relatable in its crafting of a story focused on the lives and secrets of one American family. The game is short, requiring no more than perhaps two hours to complete, yet its narrow focus on the slow revelations of the lives of the Greenbriar family keep the player fully immersed in its limited world. The game's sole playable environment is the Greenbriar home, which the player is free to explore in any way he or she so chooses. As such, paralleling the player's ability in *Far Cry 4* to "complete" the game within the first 20 minutes, the player technically can rapidly find the key required to access the home's attic, even though its hiding spot is not overt and requires other narrative clues to discover organically over the course of the game. The attic is otherwise the final location the player accesses and contains the conclusion to the game's main narrative thread involving the teenager Sam. Barring that sudden and abrupt ending to the game, which eliminates all of its narrative richness in the slow unfolding of the lives of the Greenbriars, the game focuses on carefully providing glimpses into lives

in much the way they exist in reality: through music choices, diary pages, messages, letters, and the like. Since *Gone Home* takes place in 1995, email and the Internet are absent from the game. The exploration of the house and the game's success at conveying its narrative solely through exploration and the objects left behind by the Greenbriars showcase how digital stories may eschew traditional forms of storytelling in creative ways. Although epistolary novels certainly are a corollary to the type of plot revelation found in *Gone Home*, the epistolary novel is external to the reader in a way that the player's finding these objects, in the various places in the house where such items might be found or hidden, creates a more intimate environment. Robin J. S. Sloan asserts of the game's use of common objects to heighten the narrative experience, "These items have individual functionality: written notes and answering machines are used to further the narrative; cassettes are used to trigger riot grrrl music; and lamps are used to illuminate the environment" (538). Each element—a favorite song, a character's handwriting, the sound of his or her voice on an answering machine—all serve to humanize the Greenbriars.

Gone Home cleverly diverts the player's attention from the reality-rooted events by insinuating throughout the game that supernatural events may be at play. The house itself, several stories large, is empty, save for the player, and seemingly abandoned at the game's start. Elements, such as a hidden room and one family member's belief that a former owner may be haunting the house, feed into a sense of foreboding, but not in a way that ultimately detracts from the narrative's "true" story. Drew Toal considers the narrative's overall trajectory and its early hints that the events in the Greenbriar home contain some supernatural elements, stating, "*Gone Home*'s makers expertly take our expectations—namely, the expectations of what should happen when you're alone in a big, empty house during a thunderstorm—and turn them against us in a bit of storytelling judo. There's a subtle tension exerted throughout, which by the end of the game, standing beneath the attic door, has built into something positively white-knuckled" (n.p.). Indeed, the game toys with expectations of the horror genre but allows the simpler story to remain in focus and to maintain its sense of narrative tension as the player discovers each subsequent piece of the story. In his review of *Gone Home* for the *New York Times*, Chris Suellentrop contends that the developers "created a confident, resonant, entirely believable world that is interestingly ordinary" (n.p.), and it is here, in this fictional world rendered such that it could be anyone's story of a homecoming and a family no longer as he or she left it, that *Gone Home*'s narrative transcends the seemingly simple plot of its story. Marie-Laure Ryan contends,

> Strategic places are locations that need to be controlled in order to gain some advantage, especially military or economical. Examples are the Bosporus in World War I or the Straights of Ormuz in the current oil situation. In the game of baseball, the field

> as a whole is a strategic space, but the bases are strategic places. As long as players stay on base they are safe; but once they venture onto the path between bases, they can be thrown out. Home plate is the ultimate strategic place: when players get there they become invulnerable, until they're next at bat…. Literature has a rich tradition of developing and pitting against each other emotional and strategic experiences of space [108].

The ideas of invulnerability, control, and physical space combine in *Gone Home* such that a simple location, a family home, functions at once as a source of nostalgia, an unfamiliar landscape, and a place that must be mastered, both by the player and the game's protagonist. The game's narrative never leaves its first location, a sprawling yet abandoned family home, but still sets the player on edge due to the foreboding sense that this location is less a home and more a house. Moreover, its environments—its rooms and hallways—are unknown to the player, such that the sense of safety and belonging one usually feels when at "home" are stripped away. Left in its place is a feeling of unease, which places the player in the role of having to control the situation—and the environment—to make sense of it.

The game's story exists literally and figuratively scattered throughout the family home, formed by a chain of events that become increasingly clear as the player explores its rooms and discovers the secrets every family possesses. The player embodies Kaitlin Greenbriar, who is twenty-one years old and has just returned from a year overseas. The game is experienced through a first-person perspective such that the exploration takes on more urgent meaning created from the narrative's overarching sense that the player and Kaitlin, given her extended absence, are in many ways strangers to this family. Moreover, the player embodying Kaitlin is forced to intrude on the personal spaces of the previous occupants both physically, by entering their rooms unbidden, and psychologically, by pouring over their private documents to attempt to garner clues about why the family seems to be missing. Daniel Reynolds explores the use of the first-person perspective in *Gone Home* by arguing,

> The game is played from Kaitlin's optical point of view, but she is never visible onscreen. In this visual sense, Kaitlin is herself an "unseen woman," and she is arguably somewhat of a cipher, present mainly as a figure of identification for the game's player. At times, however, this enactive inversion of the "unseen woman" dynamic recedes and Kaitlin's subjectivity becomes apparent, with her opinions and preferences expressed through the game's onscreen text narration or enacted through momentary manipulations of the game's control scheme [49].

The human drama that begins to unfold as the player discovers found objects, such as invoices, provides a relatable and poignant experience. Kaitlin has been absent for a year, and during that time, although she has kept in contact via telephone calls and letters with her family, much has changed. At various

points during the player's investigation of the house, Sam's voice narrates entries from her journal as the player finds them, allowing for the entries to carry a more visceral weight. The first such entry underscores their importance to the narrative:

> Dear Katie,
>
> So much has changed, even just since you've been gone. We moved into this house…. I'm in a new school … and my big sister being gone for a year doesn't make it any easier…. It doesn't feel real. But I'm not going to let it faze me. I used to tell you everything, and if I can't do it in person because you're off gallivanting around who knows where, I'll just tell it to this journal. Just like I was talking to you.

Kaitlin arrives, after a late flight, to a deserted home and, initially, has no idea where everyone has gone. She has expected to reunite with her parents and her younger sister, Sam, who turned eighteen while Kaitlin was away. It is not as simple as Kaitlin returning to her childhood home and experiencing a powerful sense of nostalgia: this house is new, and Kaitlin has never lived in it. The remaining Greenbriars moved in while she was away, leaving Kaitlin absent from the bonding and the emotional upheaval associated with settling in and adjusting to the new home and from Sam's having to adjust to a new high school. As much as the player embodying Kaitlin feels a sense of unease about this new environment, so too does Kaitlin.

Her parents' marriage has been steadily disintegrating as a result of her father's failed writing career and her mother's romantic feelings toward a coworker. She finds clues throughout the house of the increased friction between them and the revelation that they have lied to everyone about leaving for a sudden camping trip, thus explaining why they are unexpectedly absent when Kaitlin arrives home. Instead, they are embarking on intensive marriage counseling. Sam's life has also been marked by upheaval and change. Importantly, Sam's parents discover that she is gay after she falls in love with Lonnie and the pair begins a relationship. Her parents are not supportive and order Sam to stop seeing Lonnie.

It is this last aspect of the narrative, that of Sam's coming of age, coming out, and finding her first great love, that drives the exploration of the home as a whole and that makes the discovery of the attic key so central. Even though the player embodies Kaitlin, and her parents' marital troubles are certainly important, the narrative emerges as Sam's story: that of a young woman coming of age, discovering her sexuality, and having to navigate the exhilaration and terror of her burgeoning adult sense of self without the help of her physically absent sister or her emotionally absent parents. The final entry of Sam's journal is found in the attic and unravels the true reason for Sam's absence from the house. Sam writes of Lonnie, who has experienced a powerful change of heart and cannot leave Sam behind for basic training as

she is supposed to, "She said, 'Sam, I want you to pack up everything you can and get in your car and come find me and let's just drive … until we find somewhere … for us. And she asked me … if I could do that. And I said yes…. Yes!" Sam's voice-over reading of the journal adds a powerful sense of youthful longing and energy to the entry, along with the poignancy of the power of a first great love. Certainly, the two of them running off together may not work out long-term, and Lonnie may face serious consequences for going AWOL from basic training. Yet these very real concerns lie outside the boundaries of the narrative, which ends with Kaitlin, having been gone a year, discovering that her younger sister has now done precisely what Kaitlin had done the year before: set out to find her own way. Dimitrios Pavlounis asserts, "*Gone Home* is essentially a game about engaging and exploring archives, its very title implying a feverish obsession with origins. Although the game's story is fictional, the response to the game nonetheless illustrates the potential of virtual archival spaces to transmit knowledge and feeling related to queer history" (582). What emerges is an origin story of sorts, one which is remade and recontextualized throughout the course of the game, as the player's new discoveries force a reconsideration of those that came before them. In terms of Sam's coming out, what must have been her initial fears over coming out to her parents prove poignantly realized when they reject her and the young woman with whom she has fallen in love. It is fitting, then, that the story of that love exists in ephemeral space—in ink and in pages—as Sam's attempt at a human connection with her parents has led to an estrangement. Sam has no reason to necessarily believe that Kaitlin may react differently, however much she might hope that to be the case. So instead of going to Kaitlin and telling her these things in person—even arranging a meeting after she has run away—Sam turns to the idea of the archive as the bearer of her most intimate sense of self identity. Pavlounis finds problematical, however, the means by which *Gone Home* attempts to resolve Sam's homosexuality and Kaitlin's homecoming and discovery of that secret. He notes,

> Through gating techniques, the game moves the player through the space and the narrative in a straight line, offering up conventional narratives of monogamous love, self-discovery, and the redemption of the family while erasing and disavowing the traces of queer intimacy and heterosexual disconnect that define the home at the beginning of the game. In short, this produces the archive as a site of stasis rather than, in Kate Eichhorn's (2013, 9) terms, a space of possibility that provides a way to imagine "other ways to live in the present" [586].

He raises a compelling point about the game's ultimate lack of resolution for Sam's storyline. However, it need not be the case that such a lack of complete resolution reflects a more determined effort to un-queer the narrative. As was stated earlier, the game does not require the player to move through the

space in one linear format; indeed, the player can potentially move almost directly to Sam's secret, without any of the other context provided by the game. It also is not fully the case that the ending of the game "redeems" Kaitlin's family. Instead, they are fractured, separated now both emotionally and geographically. If anything, the game closes on the unanswered question of Kaitlin's response to what she learns about Sam. She is on the cusp of two potential actions: one reifying her parents' own privileging of heteronormative structures and one casting away their outmoded line of thinking. Kaitlin may also serve as a bridge between the bifurcated halves of her family. The point *Gone Home* makes, by refusing resolution, reiterates the reality at the heart of any family lies some amount of unknowable space, some distance between its members.

Where *Gone Home* invites the player to explore the unraveling and possible reunification of a family, *Fingerbones* horrifies the player with its presentation of a father who opts to do the unspeakable. *Fingerbones*, a chilling narrative told through just a few short text-based images, sound, and use of light and darkness to set the frame, is the final example of narrative-centric games in this section. The game possesses a simple interface, and aside from some basic puzzles, presents no difficulty for even a novice or new gamer, as has been the case with the other examples in this section. It is also the shortest example, taking perhaps no more than half an hour to complete. However, it utilizes specific elements of the horror genre, including a confined space and sounds designed to immerse the player in an oppressive and increasingly horrifying environment. The game was developed and created solely by David Szymanski, and it showcases how platforms like Steam, followed by word of mouth reviews, can allow a narrative like this to reach a large audience. In this case, the game is available for free. Not all developers can afford the relative luxury of producing a game and offering it for free, but it is akin in many ways to the self-publishing market now competing with books published by traditional publishing houses. Certainly, quality can be an issue. In the case of indie games, though, a robust community and input and interaction with the developers can help a game find its footing if it merits such action or lose an audience if the game is poor. *Fingerbones* succeeds due to Szymanski's keen understanding of how to use the digital environment to create a building sense of terror. On his blog, he discusses his views of effective horror storytelling, arguing,

> I firmly believe, and I think you'd agree, that "horror" only works in the context created by and/or alongside the cultivation of "terror." Which is to say that nothing is frightening unless the time/gameplay/narrative/what have you surrounding it makes it frightening. Specifically, the player has to be in the right state of mind, and making an effective horror game is about doing everything possible to put them there. There are different ways and philosophies of doing this. I try to do it through narrative [n.p.].

Herein lies the unique nature of *Fingerbones* as a condensed, claustrophobic, and closely bounded horror tale. To keep the player completely immersed in the nightmarish world of the game, Szymanski, on the official Steam page for the game, recommends playing it through in one sitting. Such advice recalls the words of Edgar Allan Poe in his seminal work "The Philosophy of Composition." In it, Poe addresses the importance of the "unity of impression" of any written work. Poe reasoned that whenever the reader put down a given work, he or she lost the entirety of the effect that was only possible without any intervening incidents or events to take the reader out of the power of the story (163). While *Fingerbones* remains a powerful story even if the gamer is forced to split his or her playthrough into more than one session, its greatest power lies in experiencing the story as a unified whole.

The player, who experiences the game through the first-person perspective, begins the game in a sunlit, sparsely furnished room that appears to be a warehouse or workshop. The narrative is revealed to the player via a series of journal entries scattered throughout the gaming environment, which eventually expands to reveal a series of lower levels beneath the original room. No other character is physically present in the story, and the player does not realize until the very end of the game that he or she has embodied the otherwise unseen journal writer all along. From contextual clues in the entries, the writer, a divorced father with a young step-daughter named Katie, initially seems to suffer resentment and apathy over his situation, as revealed in his first entry, "I am not depressed. I am enlightened." As the player explores the remainder of the room, he or she discovers additional journal pages and learns that the only goal of the game lies in opening a series of locked doors leading to the lower floors and a wall safe. The puzzles themselves, consisting primarily of the player deriving clues from the journal pages to find passwords unlocking these areas, are not designed to be the primary focus of the game and are relatively simple to solve. For example, one of the passwords is his daughter's name, which is found in the first of the journal pages. The story derives its power from the player slowly unraveling the horror of what has occurred in the journal writer's life. The manner in which the narrative builds to its full revelation is both powerful and devastating.

The player finds clues hinting that an apocalyptic event ended the world. Journal pages indicating that "most of the town is dead" hint that the building is a survival bunker. The writer later mentions a food shortage, with only "enough for one." However, even this proves problematical in that the letter writer reveals himself to be a savage murderer, and one without the slightest regret. He argues that morality "should not be determined by feeling," as a means to justify all the atrocities he has committed. To that end, the narrative provides no concrete evidence that any population-decimating event ever happened but suggests that this may be a delusion created by the letter writer

to support his misanthropic urges. Since the player never leaves the initial setting of the game, no independent verification of this is possible.

However, the game's masterful use of sound and setting do provide confirmation of the worst of the letter writer's confessions. Regardless of whether an apocalyptic event really happened, the father ends up staying with his daughter in his bunker. Whether he has kidnapped her as part of a custody dispute—he has a palpable hatred of his former wife—remains unclear. At some point during their sojourn in the bunker, the father turns monstrous. The narrative sustains a consistent level of dread by releasing these details in fragments, sometimes out of order, thereby depriving them of immediate context. For example, the player finds a brief journal entry stating, "When I was 15 years old, I lost my virginity. I shook uncontrollably the entire time. I felt that same sense of primal excitement last night." When taken together with the entry in which he confesses, "There are things I've wanted to do for years. Desires I've kept locked up in the back of my consciousness. It's been nearly a year since I've seen a woman, and now I realize there's no practical reason to keep those desires locked up anymore," the reader becomes fully immersed in the unspeakable. Clearly, the father is not alone in the bunker. He already referenced a food shortage, implying he will not or cannot share whatever resources he has, and said early on of the apocalyptic event that "Katie and I only survived because we ran to the bunker." This brings into sharp relief the first of the terrible revelations: he and Katie have been together in the bunker for some undetermined period of time, and at some point, he began raping her. This is where the sound and setting become so critical to the exploration of the narrative. When the player moves to the lower levels of the bunker, all becomes grey, or almost completely dark, save for the illumination provided by a flashlight. Since the player often has to go back up from the cellar to the sunlit main room—the father was careful to create a bunker with multiple electronically locked and password protected doors—the change proves unsettling and incongruous. The sound design becomes important, especially in these lower levels, as the player hears someone, presumably Katie, crying, breathing, and screaming at various points during the exploration. The player now lacks certainty about whether the rooms are haunted, and if the narrative might shift into a more traditional ghost format. But it does not, instead rooting its horror in the exploration of what a human being is capable of doing to another, with punctuations of crying and suffering against the otherwise inorganic sounds of the game, such as a generator or a computer keyboard, to effectively convey the text-based story.

The narrative's final revelation occurs when the player gains access to the final room in the bunker and finds a bloody slab table in the center. Torture implements sit on its edge. The journal page in that room speaks to the final horrors perpetrated on Katie, revealing, "She finally died last night. I

don't know whether from starvation, dehydration, or blood loss. I threw her body into the woods. Her fingers—my anti-religious artifacts … my testaments to moral and intellectual freedom—are locked in the safe upstairs. I am content in the knowledge that I haven't done anything wrong." Certainly, these are the words of a remorseless rapist and murderer, and the narrative pieces have now coalesced into a complete narrative. At this point, though, the narrative forces one last horror on the player. The screen goes black after the player reads this last journal entry, and stays that way for a few seconds such that a boundary between the narrative proper and what follows is clearly delineated. At this point, for the first time, the story is narrated by an external third-person omniscient narrator. The closing text reads,

> The father didn't know why he'd come back after all these years, starving and tired.
> He just wanted to see the cellar one last time.
> With one last flicker, the flashlight died and he was left in the pitch dark.
> He sat on the cold floor and closed his eyes.
> He could hear her, even now.
> It was peaceful here in the cellar.
> It was free here in the cellar.

It is here that the player realizes that he or she has been embodying the father all along. Now, the player has been made complicit in all that has happened in the narrative, which is really the story of how the father returns to the scene of his crimes to relive them. The story shifts from a more traditional horror narrative in which the player, reader, or filmgoer acts as a witness to horror, or perhaps in the case of some games and found-footage horror films, interacts with the narrative as a potential victim to its events. Here, *Fingerbones* places the player in the unenviable role of voyeur, embodied in the man who committed the atrocity. The game itself is simple and, by modern standards, looks fairly rudimentary in the rendering of its images. What it lacks in those areas it more than makes up for in its fractured story that proves all too real: that of a man capable of rape and murder without remorse. Chris Priestman recounts his own reactions to his initial playthrough:

> Knowledge is terror in *Fingerbones*. As in *Gone Home*, your sole activity is scanning desktops and shelves for notes. Some are personal: You learn that you're a man who lacks affection for his young daughter, the fruits of his failed marriage.
>
> Others are ripped from manuscripts and books, revealing an interest in existentialism, science, and a growing misanthropy on the side. The irrational reasoning of the latter makes you question whether the supposed post-apocalyptic backdrop as "maybe the last man on Earth" is real, or conjured up in his mind. Either way, it won't be long until you become disconnected from the man you embody [n.p.].

Certainly, the father's actions are so disgusting so as to force most players to disassociate themselves from him and absolve themselves of responsibility for what he has done. Yet the player has still been forced to bear witness to

atrocity, and the lingering stain of that horror allows *Fingerbones* to construct an effective narrative with few of the technological complexities of modern games.

The games in this chapter are heavily focused on narrative, though they explore their respective stories in different ways, and underscore the power of the digital form as an effective and vital storytelling medium. Certainly, those games boasting 40 or more hours of play time lend themselves as easy candidates to lengthy and highly immersive storytelling. However, games requiring as little as one hour, or even less, draw from the same basic set of narrative tools as their long-form counterparts. Excellent storytelling in the digital form requires the coming together of narrative, sound, environment, and immersion to present stories that are, as all great stories are, an exploration of our common humanity. While some may be hopeful or lighthearted, others unrelentingly dark, they all share, as the examples in the preceding text have argued, the ability to engage players on a deep and profound level.

5

Video Game Study and the Higher Education Classroom

The results of research conducted for this book presented a compelling case for *why* digital narratives merit ongoing scholarly study as the form itself continues to present players with engaging and complicated stories rivaling their counterparts in literature and film. What remains to be discussed, and is briefly explored in this final chapter, is *how* this can be accomplished in a classroom setting. University programs around the country—both within a specific department and across disciplines—seeking to further video game study are steadily appearing. However, given that video games draw scholars from fields as diverse as literature and computer science, one challenge facing the field is that not every university explores video game study in the same fashion. Some universities aim to integrate students interested in either the critical study or the production of video games within a single program, with the rationale that the best video game narratives are logically created by those who study and have a deep love for storytelling in all its forms. Moreover, students who assert a wish to avoid traditional literature courses are more likely to study storytelling when given the opportunity, in whole or in part, via the study of video games. Because my background is in literature—a field I still dearly love—it is critically important to me not only that students understand how stories and their meanings come together but also that students read. Alexander Reid contends,

> This issue, simply put, is the identification of cultural objects and practices as knowable only through a limited set of humanistic methods that are kept separate from the methods of mathematics and science. This identification has created the absolute divide between nature and culture: a definition that, for Latour, shapes the modern era. The humanities has, as a modern discipline, operated on the principle that scientific discourses and methods are appropriate only to matters of nature while cultural matters demand a separate set of methods and inquiries. The contemporary moment has put unrelenting pressures on that divide [16].

with the issue here being an unnatural conflict between a more "traditional" understanding of the humanities and the sciences. Such a divide may also serve as a barrier in the study of digital narrative. He further imagines "A Latourian speculative rhetoric then takes up the challenge of investigating a hybridized space that technology, nature, society, culture, and discourse commonly share'" (19). Herein lies the great allure, and also the challenges, of incorporating video game study in the classroom in such a way as to necessarily require students to play the assigned titles and to treat them with thought and care, as they would any other assigned text. Studying digital storytelling is analogous but not identical to studying written text. The technological nature of the medium must be folded into the discussion as much as the storytelling elements. The benefit to students, via such a pathway of study, lies in breaking down these artificial barriers between disciplines as outlined by Reid.

This final chapter describes my experiences in designing and teaching English courses using video games, as well as in increasing on-campus accessibility to video games and gaming consoles. These courses feature literature and digital narratives studied side by side so that students develop rigorous critical thinking skills regarding storytelling in general, regardless of form. For me, storytelling is the heart of what it means to be human. When students do not appreciate or understand that, they lose something primal to the human experience. Considering that many students are avid consumers of video games, perhaps engaging more frequently in games than even avid readers engage with books, their abilities to consider, analyze, and interrogate the stories they are playing become of primary importance. Kurt Squire argues,

> To date, educational research that treats videogames seriously has been slim, with the bulk of existing work examining representations in games. However, a mature body of educational games scholarship should address three interrelated areas: the critical study of games as participation in ideological systems, "learning as performance," and educational games as designed experiences. Central to the serious study of games are questions of how players make sense of these digitally mediated experiences: If games are "possibility spaces," then researchers need to account for how players inhabit them and the mechanisms by which meanings become interpreted from these experiences ["Content to Context" 20].

I believe that my particular approach to the study of digital storytelling in the classroom addresses Squire's vital point regarding the inherent intersection of video games, culture, and society. Video games do not exist nor are they created in a vacuum. In the same way that literature courses are important as means to connect students to the tensions, dialogues, and negotiations within a written text, so too are video game studies vital for students to understand how to view digital stories as cultural artifacts. Although I appreciate

that every educational experience is different, I hope that my approach will provide both guidance and help to those who would like to teach digital storytelling but are unsure of the logistics or even how to begin.

Although many universities may be interested in the digital humanities, given the relatively recent emergence of video game studies as a field, few institutions may have the resources to create an ideal degree of student access to the games and gaming equipment. However, increasing video game access on campus is important if students will be required to purchase video games as they do textbooks, novels, anthologies, and other necessary course materials. Cost and access are aspects that should be considered and mitigated whenever possible, as video games range in price from a few dollars to as much as $60.00 for a brand-new release. Used games are certainly a possibility, and large PC game stores, such as Steam, frequently have sales. However, the cost of a course requiring more than one newly released video game—without options for used copies or timely sales, which cannot be counted on—quickly escalates. This cost is coupled with a student's ability to access either a gaming console, PC, or laptop that can run video games, as most modern games cannot run on low-end or basic computers that are several years old. Depending on the game, the gaming console needed may be an Xbox, Xbox One, PlayStation 3, or PlayStation 4. Most games these days are released across platforms, meaning released simultaneously to PC and gaming consoles, which eliminates some accessibility problems. However, some games, such as *The Last of Us*, may be played using only one medium, for example, the Playstation 3 or 4. If the exclusive medium is a PC, then students will likely have access, either to one they own or one available on campus. Console-exclusivity, though, does create a real possibility that some students may not have access to a console and may not have the funds to afford one. A university with a large and diverse student body will likely include a number of students who are eager to learn and to succeed, but for whom cost may be a consideration. For example, some students have funds to purchase only one textbook at a time as they get paid. Courses in the digital humanities are an important part of a liberal arts education, providing students with the opportunity to critically engage, in the case of my courses, with a medium they likely already love. Offering additional access options to course materials allows those students who would otherwise have to forego taking a class with a required video game the opportunity to attend.

Unfortunately, there are those in higher education who do not consider cost an issue, believing that college is an investment, which it certainly is, and that students should pay whatever is necessary for supplies. I struggled to agree but could not bring myself to adopt that attitude. Wherever possible, in all of my classes, I compare anthologies for cost and content, determine the number of used book copies that may be available, and explore other meas-

ures, mindful of the student who desires to take courses, but who has legitimate financial concerns. The last thing I want is to have a student read a course description and be excited to take my class but be unable to bear the cost. In an ideal situation, all students would enjoy equal and unfettered access to courses, without concern for the cost of each course's required materials. Reality is far different, and it is part of higher education's role to assist students, whenever possible, with issues of access. That does not mean that course quality should suffer out of concern for cost, but rather that careful consideration should be given and attention paid to cost.

Solutions to the issue of cost and video games can take a number of forms. One method lies in the early contact of students registered for a course with a gaming requirement, prior to the term. This contact would serve to remind or explain to students the requirement—the use of video games for class is still new to most students—and to encourage them to either contact the professor or to look for sales, should cost be an issue. Another possible solution lies in allowing time during the first class for students to meet one another and determine whether they want to pair up or play in small groups to mitigate the cost by sharing it. As long as each student takes good notes and rotates playing through the game, pair or group playing does not diminish the overall intent of having students study digital narrative. Finally, another good solution is to balance the cost by selecting titles across a range of price points. For example, chose one newer, relatively expensive game balanced by titles that cost substantially less.

To allow broader access to gaming materials for my classes, I embarked on a fundraising endeavor that evolved into a partnership with the library on my campus. University libraries are increasingly adding video games and consoles to their digital media offerings. My university, as well as many others, are using crowdfunding platforms as a means to enable professors, departments, and even student groups access to fundraising for projects with unavailable or scarce funding opportunities. Grant funds are generally reserved for very specific projects with clear goals, outcomes, and parameters. The creation of a digital media library designed to provide access to digital sources for gaming is a type of project for which grant funding is difficult to find, but for which crowdfunding proves an ideal option. Students and other members of the community, both within and outside the university, have the opportunity to donate, which proves especially meaningful for those who cannot afford to give much but want to contribute even a few dollars to a cause in which they believe. In my case, I partnered with our library. The library contributed development funds to close the gap between my fundraising goal and the funds actually raised. My university's crowdfunding platform has a deadline of 30 days, which is a tight timeframe for raising funds. My efforts resulted in a pilot program, which began with the start of the fall 2016 semester,

wherein gaming equipment was available as a course reserve item for students enrolled in any of my classes. The library has two Playstation 3s and two Playstation 4s, plus a significant number of games I selected based on those games I use as teaching materials now and those that may work well for teaching digital storytelling in general. The goal moving forward is to expand access to gaming equipment beyond course reserves for my classes. Access to gaming equipment has been initially controlled so that general student interest could be gauged but the equipment would also be available for students required to play games for class. In order to reduce the risk of theft or damage to the equipment, the gaming materials were kept in the library. Students could use the gaming consoles at several media stations, and a group media room was also available should students want to come together.

In the absence of a university-sponsored crowdfunding platform, standard crowdfunding sources, such as Kickstarter, are an option for faculty attempting to add gaming equipment as a resource to students. As my experience indicates, university libraries are a potential resource for funding digital humanities more generally and gaming equipment more specifically. The library at the University of California, Santa Cruz, serves as just one of many examples. It has a complete gaming laboratory with a variety of consoles available for both faculty and student use. While consoles may not be checked out of the library, games can be borrowed for up to two weeks. The library at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign is actively growing its gaming collection, which contains both new and vintage titles. It actively solicits suggestions from the university community regarding which games should be acquired. University systems across the country are increasingly interested in providing faculty and staff with video game access, thus enhancing the reach of digital humanities and student ability to critically engage with gaming.

My former students related that they enjoyed studying video games and appreciated the opportunity to discuss them as part of their course. Students tend to self-select into these types of classes, meaning that they choose such classes because they are interested in the gaming component. However, whether because of scheduling conflicts, not fully reading course descriptions, or other issues, some students may arrive in class without noticing or understanding the gaming requirement for a course. This dovetails with two other important issues, the first related to the time requirement for each game assigned in a course and the second to player ability. Trent Hergenrader stresses the importance of being a "well-played" gamer when he argues,

> Most importantly, students—as well as their instructors—must play games to truly become involved in the conversation. Games require active participation, which makes them a choice fit for the dynamic field of digital humanities. It is tempting for traditionalists to dismiss digital games as the province of adolescent teen males

> enacting violent power fantasies, but that discounts the widespread impact games have on our culture, across ages and genders—especially the central role games play in the lives of today's college students [32].

Hergenrader's points here dovetail back to the concept of being "well-played" that was explored in Chapter 1. Here, it also specifically draws attention to the level of time investment required of students over the course of a semester and how the individual time investment required of each potential game assigned merit careful consideration. The time needed to play involved digital narratives must be considered as the course syllabus is built. If, for example, a game requires 40 hours to complete, the instructor should consider how to appropriately pace the gaming over the length of the semester. For relatively long games, such as *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* with its playtime easily reaching or crossing 80 hours, the instructor will need to decide in advance whether students must *complete* all elements of the game or reach a certain narrative point in the game. In my experience, it is unlikely that more than two long games can be assigned, in addition to other readings and requirements, in a given semester. Students in my courses play games outside of class, so games are treated similar to reading or other required out-of-class work. Classroom time is reserved for lecture and discussion about what they have played or observed and supplemental readings, such as scholarly resources about video game study. In my courses, which are a blend of digital and traditional literature, there are also additional time demands on students in the form of readings each week. Thus, I mix a variety of long and short titles to enhance gaming diversity while maintaining realistic time parameters.

The second issue of concern, whether stemming from students who paid no attention to gaming requirements when registering or those who grasped the requirement but have little or no video game playing experience, lies in students feeling sufficiently confident to complete all the required games. A gaming tip sheet is a valuable resource for these students. Specifics will change depending on the games assigned, but advising students to play games on "easy" mode when that option is available, especially for students concerned about their reflexes or having to aim weapons, and to take time to explore the digital world helps them to relax about gaming requirements and begin to enjoy this vibrant new source of discussion and critical engagement. Another option for students with low confidence in their gaming skills lies in encouraging students to form a sense of community by helping one another. My courses contain group work, so students form a sense of community early in the semester. I have found that students who are experienced gamers generally offer a great deal of help and support to those who are struggling. Fostering and encouraging this help not only assists the students in forging connections with one another but also helps those students initially reluctant about gaming to feel a sense of camaraderie rather than of isolation.

Digital storytelling can be incorporated into courses in a variety of ways. I close this final chapter with my experiences in instructing video game study, while acknowledging that my approach is merely one of many, as video games can be used in any number of courses, from game development to media studies, cultural studies, and beyond. How video games may be integrated into a semester of learning is limited only by an instructor's willingness and creativity. As mentioned previously, my approach is to have students study traditional storytelling—literature—alongside digital storytelling. James Paul Gee situates the role of the digital text against the written, noting, "Video games have … a great deal to teach us about how reading printed texts actually works when people understand—again, in situated, embodied, active, and critical ways—what they read" (100). In exploring both, I have found that students become far more proficient in understanding both. This critical textual and cultural literacy crosses from the digital text, with which many students have a stronger initial interest, to the written text, which many previously uninterested students find passion for during a semester focusing on both storytelling forms. The following examples of how I integrated these elements may serve as a starting point—perhaps inspiration—for other professors who hope to include the study of video games in their classes.

My first inclusion of gaming in a course was in 2014, when I developed a seminar for second-year students incorporating their studying of world literature with their playing of *BioShock* and *BioShock Infinite*.[1] In order to provide the course with context and coherence, the reading list was organized around the major thematic areas found in each game. The course began with an exploration of systems of moral and philosophical thought and moved through other major thematic groupings, such as the exploitation of children and moral choice. The gameplay was evenly spaced over the semester, with approximately eight weeks recommended for each game. Students enjoyed analyzing the games, and the literature discussion was stronger because students were actively engaged in issues related to both the game and the reading. I found ways to frequently combine games and literature into a larger discussion. Students willingly made the cross-media connection between the readings and games, as well as connections within the various readings. For assigning coursework, I provided options for students to compose essays and answer exam questions about the games and the literature. These students developed better writing skills and presented richer ideas than my previous students, likely because they were more consistently engaged and felt the course had more direct relevance to their lives, as it included both digital storytelling and traditional literature. Patrick Jagoda argues,

> Researchers, teachers, and university administrators are bound to see many more instances of gamification, as well as myriad learning experiments with games, in the coming years. Additionally, digital games are likely to develop into and remain a

> major topic for the digital humanities, affecting existing research trajectories in art history, literature, visual and media studies, philosophy, and education, as well as producing new types of research through transdisciplinary fields such as game studies. In recent years, digital games have been building cultural legitimacy [194].

Gamification of the classroom and the study of video games should be viewed as two halves of a pedagogical whole. Literary study can be used as a parallel example to the types of learning possible through the study of digital storytelling. Students create meaning from K–12 to the university level by being asked to create experiences and knowledge *through* the creation of text, whether fiction or nonfiction. In the higher education classroom, not only can these possibilities exist, but they can do so on a necessarily more sophisticated level than they may in their iterations at the K–12 level. While my focus lies in the study of digital storytelling, as opposed to teaching via gamification, the potential points of connection and throughways that run from K–12 up through higher education leave me hopeful and excited for a curriculum that validates not only digital storytelling but also gaming more generally in ways that will eventually allow for connections across students' educational experiences, as opposed to courses studying story in video games existing as more of a niche university offering.

I was nervous as to how my first video game study attempt would be received not only by students but also by interested administrators. I *believed* that my students wanted to talk cogently and thoughtfully about the games they loved, but until that course, I had no way of knowing whether my belief would manifest in the outcomes of the course and students' reactions to it. After finding pedagogic success in this first course, I expanded my use of digital storytelling into most of the other courses I teach and will continue revising my courses so that soon they all will. One course I recently developed is a genre study of horror in which students read a wide selection of classic and contemporary horror and play a variety of horror digital narratives. This sustained focus on horror allows students to understand how authors and video game developers use parallel, but very different, techniques in creating mood and environment. Because this course has a more extensive gaming requirement, and since this course started prior to the gaming equipment in the library becoming available for student use, I incorporate a few titles that are free to play. This provides an unexpected but compelling opportunity for students to discuss the challenges faced by indie developers with small budgets, to consider whether the best games are those with the largest development budgets, and to study how a game made under a small-budget constraint constructs immersion and environment in ways different from those used in a large-budget title.

One final example of incorporating video games into courses involves my "Writing About Literature" class. This course is required of all English majors

at my university. Its goals are to introduce students to a wide variety of literature—poetry, short fiction, novel, etc.—and to give them the tools and skills to analyze and write about literature with confidence as they move into their upper division courses. Students also learn to analyze and write about storytelling in the digital humanities, and thus in video games. Several games are used in rotation for the digital narrative unit, including *Life Is Strange* and *Dear Esther*. Again, I have found that students are eager to talk about digital narratives in an academic setting. They also learn to write about the material, which they often have fallen in love with, using terminology and concepts unique to digital storytelling. Matthew Gaydos and Kurt Squire discuss the complexities of gamifying the classroom and note,

> In light of recent trends to "gamify" social structures, we argue that research examining the importance of games literacy is essential for creating and distributing games that do not reify and perpetuate current social inequities. While games can provide local context and civic-mindedness to play via narrative (e.g., Jan 2008), limitations that accompany the meaning-making processes associated with game play may interfere with presenting educational content or identities to players, highlighting that an individual player's own background and set of experiences will impact the interpretation of the digital story [840].

Although they speak here of the implication of digital storytelling to a teaching pedagogy concerned with gamification, the point underscores why the study of storytelling in video games needs more emphasis. Courses asking students to analyze digital stories with the same exacting level of attention they would give to traditional written stories allow not only for additional meaning-making, as they speak of here, but perhaps more crucially, for an understanding as to how meaning-making originates from an individual level and from a given cultural perspective.

To the scholar whose reading of this book has sparked an interest in developing courses in video game study, I am pleased to have shared my experiences. I hope that your interest and courses will inspire creativity in others, across disciplines. The department chairs and deans with whom I worked, English and liberal arts, respectively, supported my endeavors, which certainly overcame one major hurdle. However, for many in the liberal arts, the digital humanities, perhaps game studies most of all, remain nebulous and misunderstood. The digital humanities cannot and should not be ignored, as they are a vital and forward-looking addition to a traditional liberal arts education and directly dovetail with interests many students already have. As this book has explored, video games have evolved well beyond their eight-bit origins to what they are now: vital sources of compelling and deeply considered storytelling.

Chapter Notes

Chapter 1

1. "Ludology" and "narratology" have generally been the two camps into which game studies have been divided, and unfortunately so. As this book will highlight, one cannot possibly explore storytelling in gaming without also giving some consideration to how the game is constructed and comes together to tell that story. In the same way, it is impossible to ignore storytelling elements in games to focus on a conversation only about the mechanics of gameplay and how a given game is constructed. Both viewpoints are vital, and scholars in the field of video game studies, whether they are more ludologically or narratologically inclined, would benefit from a more expansive view of video game studies.

2. I have been a lifelong gamer, playing my first games on the Coleco Vision and the Atari. As an academic, I have a traditional scholarly background, with a Ph.D. in literature. My areas of emphasis were Shakespeare and 19th century American literature, specifically the work of Henry James. I moved my scholarly focus into digital storytelling in the last five years. I believe that my formal training in literary analysis and critique has served me well as I have turned my attention to digital storytelling.

3. I start here primarily from my own academic and teaching experiences, which I cannot imagine are so different from those of my colleagues who also work in game studies. What I find, more than anything else, is a keen sense of interest from my colleagues in other disciplines, like English, about video game study, but they appear to believe that video games are nearly wholly unexplored, or perhaps a bit of a novelty. When I have given public lectures and keynote speeches on the subject of storytelling in video games, both to academic and non-academic audiences, the response is much the same: curiosity.

4. I approach video game study with a heavy emphasis on examining digital stories as important cultural artifacts that are no different in their importance than written or other storytelling forms. This particular viewpoint stems from my background as an English professor with a special love for story. My particular angle of investigation into digital storytelling is certainly not the only approach and video game study proves exciting for its variety of perspectives.

5. Unfortunately, our popular news media culture and online discussions of video games tend to focus on the idea that video games are either trivial or a breeding ground for hatred. Neither point has any basis in reality. I would urge the scholar and reader interested in video games to set aside any of these preconceived notions.

6. All of the games selected for analysis in this book are ones I have played personally and believe merit closer attention although it was challenging to choose which games would be covered and which set aside. I appreciate that other scholars might have made different choices. Rather than suggesting conflict, however, these different choices emphasize how broad and compelling video games are.

7. I am also dismayed by the dwindling numbers of adult readers and seek to stem that tide in my own courses, which study a

combination of digital and written texts. However, I also firmly believe that such numbers represent the broader alternatives available for today's average person seeking stories.

8. My experience as a gamer leads me to consider the data a bit more in this way. I think that many women have been somewhat leery of identifying as gamers, largely due to the toxic nature of online rhetoric and dialogue about video games. That is another issue entirely, beyond the scope of this book, so I will say here only two things about this. The first is that the Internet is not a place for valuable discourse, certainly not in the blogs and YouTube channels of those deriving advertisement revenue by chalking up views and reads. Those individuals have an invested interest in saying whatever they can—oftentimes in the most hyperbolic and least accurate or researched way possible—to meet that end. Discussion board postings and other online comments are similarly not places for discourse about video games, rife as they are with anonymity and individuals who deliberately bait others by writing the most outrageous and offensive things possible. Circling back to the issue of demographics and identification as gamers, I would say that women in my age range of 40-something or close thereto who grew up playing games are becoming less reticent to identify as gamers as time goes on. I suspect that the poor wording of questions in the acquisition of data about gamers is to blame for inconsistent or less insightful results. For example, I know both men and women who would answer "no" if asked, "Are you a gamer?" This may be because they either deem "gamer" a term for someone younger or do not want themselves associated with gamers due to their negative online connotation. More fruitful results may be yielded by instead asking, "Do you ever play video games?" followed up with "How often?" and "What do you enjoy about video games?" To get to the heart of digital storytelling, the questions would also need to include "Do you think video games can tell important stories?" and "What games have you played whose stories made an impact on you?" Simply asking whether someone plays video games and leaving it there is too limiting. What would be of use, and of interest, is a wide-ranging study focusing not just on gamer demographics but also on what types of games these players gravitate toward and why.

9. The examples provided here are explored in greater detail in subsequent chapters of the book.

10. *Metal Gear Solid 5* was released to both previous and current generation platforms in addition to the PC. *BioShock Infinite* was released to the PlayStation 3, Xbox, and PC. *The Last of Us* is a title exclusive to the PlayStation 3 and 4, and this accounts for the difference in sales between this title and the first two mentioned, rather than the difference indicating a lack of success in sales for *The Last of Us*.

11. Several examples of choice-based digital narratives are studied in depth later in the book.

12. Throughout this book, the term "embody" is used to describe the relationship between the player and the character he or she plays during the course of a game. The term proves useful for describing this relationship regardless of whether the player creates his or her own character from scratch or assumes the role of a character created by the game developers, as is the case with the player embodying Henry in *Firewatch*. Because the nature of digital narrative and the playing of video games is one of immersion, the relationship between player and in-game character goes beyond the boundaries of terms such as "plays as."

13. A protagonist need not be likeable to be understandable, and I am not proposing that the only characters to whom readers, or players, may bond is one that they can fully understand as a mirror of themselves. Rather I am suggesting that the character not become so hyperbolic that the idea that he or she could really exist becomes hopelessly lost.

14. It could be argued that the game offers some overarching choice to the player in terms of his or her approach to lethality, but this has no other impact on the game's story.

15. I had an experience with these attitudes again just recently, after I gave a keynote speech about *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* and its devastating exploration of PTSD. A colleague made an off-handed comment about how all video games were violent, as if that were a given. Although I would not

go so far as to say that I encounter resistance to the *idea* of video game study, I frequently come across doggedly inaccurate conceptions of video games and a curiosity about how they are viable examples of storytelling.

16. Digital storytelling is unique as a field of study in that it can easily find relevance within numerous liberal arts, in addition to computer science, departments interested in teaching the development of games.

17. My own background and love for literature inform how I approach the study of digital narratives. As such, I frequently consider digital narratives using the same lenses and techniques that are applied to the study of more traditional forms of storytelling.

18. As is evidenced in the examples throughout this book, playing narrative-heavy video games takes an investment of time and effort. I have played games across a wide range of time requirements, from those that may be completed in a matter of an hour or two to those that have taken more than 100 hours to complete. This does not include the extra time investment needed to pay attention to details, take analytical notes, record dialogue, and perform all of the other steps required to collate an experience with a narrative into a final written form, whether it be a journal article or a book.

19. To that end, it is important to note that I have played every game that I discuss in this book and those of critical importance to me. This also informs my choices in the individual titles that receive closer analysis and scrutiny here. I have often—unless I chose to take notes during an initial playthrough—replayed games in their entirety or replayed particularly relevant chapters or missions. This is not a quick or easy process, though I love playing video games, so it is hardly onerous, but the time consideration is important.

20. In my professional experiences, which have given me the opportunity to teach and get to know many gamers both in person and online, I have never found any of them to be rude, dismissive, or otherwise negative toward me for being a female gamer. The gamers I have encountered, regardless of gender, have instead been wholly excited in being able to talk to me and to one another—across all demographic lines—about their favorite games and digital stories.

21. I fit into this latter category. As a gamer, I rarely play cooperatively or play massively multiplayer online role-playing games, such as *World of Warcraft*. I gravitate toward single-player campaigns, meaning those games that do not require the player to move through the game with others.

22. The inroads that virtual reality devices are attempting to make into the video game market are especially relevant now as a new type of engagement with a video game. It is too early, yet, to determine if game developers will come fully on board with this new technology. As of this writing, premier virtual reality systems like the Oculus Rift come with high price tags, around $600, and offer few complete games.

23. The game does provide onscreen translations of the language, at least for major narrative events. Background conversations may not always be translated, contributing to the player's sense of being immersed in a completely alien world. The result is not so dissimilar from learning a language by listening to its practical application, such as in the systems taught using Rosetta Stone or Duolingo, and then learning to recognize sentence structure and the meaning of individual words.

24. An NPC is a "non-player character." The term refers to any character encountered by the player over the course of the game. NPCs can be vital to a game's story, or may be otherwise incidental to its plot.

25. The player can create a male or female character who can be personalized with a wide variety of appearance options. Later in the game, the player has the chance to pursue either gay or straight romances with certain non-player characters (NPCs).

26. The player can view the progress of a settlement and determine whether sufficient resources exist. For example, if more people move into a settlement, the player may need to provide additional food, water, and beds.

27. I have seen stunning examples of settlements built by players that must have taken many hours to complete. One breathtaking example can be viewed in a video uploaded by the settlement's creator at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kxiGlP1sjhE. She combined the in-game available options for settlements with mods, which are objects in the PC version of the game that can be created and

manipulated by players, to create a replica of *BioShock Infinite*'s floating city Columbia. In this instance, the creation of a settlement as both functional within the game and a work of art not only meets the idea of the game being well played but also adds to that player's sense of having created an individualized and immersive environment.

28. The Little Sisters are both sources of and have the ability to harvest a gene-altering substance known as ADAM. The player has had to make the choice from very early in the game whether to try to save the Little Sisters who are left trapped in the ruins of the failed objectivist utopia of Rapture or to harvest them for their ADAM instead. By this point in the game, the player has learned that the Little Sisters often had been abducted from their families and taken involuntarily to this monstrous fate.

29. I cannot take credit for this observation. I teach a course in which students play *BioShock* and *BioShock Infinite* alongside reading a number of literary works. One of the students I had in that course brought up for class discussion this particular moment in the game and that caused me to focus more intently on the possible sexual abuse of the Little Sisters. In the final chapter of the book, I explore how I have used gaming and the exploration of digital storytelling in my own college courses.

30. The game places this date as 12/31/1959, when a coordinated Splicer attack led to the final downfall of Rapture and the deaths of most of its inhabitants. The player, embodying a man named Jack, enters Rapture sometime during 1960.

31. The Little Sisters, as their name implies, are always female. Based on their appearance, they all seem to be no more than five or six years old. Although they can kill using their needle guns, they are generally helpless when the player comes upon them in Rapture. They are protected by Big Daddies, who are humans who have been physically and biologically altered to "imprint" on the Little Sisters and protect them to the death.

32. The use of "achievement" here has to do with the idea of a personal sense of satisfaction for having accomplished something. Gaming also uses the term "achievement" to refer to reaching a particular goal or milestone in a game, for which the player may be rewarded a virtual trophy, viewable on that person's user profile page on gaming console. This latter type of achievement can take many forms, offering players very simple goals to achieve, which may be awarded automatically, for example, upon the completion of main quests, and ones that require a great deal of effort. *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* offers one such difficult achievement, and to get it, the player must complete all missions in the game—some fifty of them—with an S rank. The S rank, the highest completion rank, usually involves the player completing missions quickly while not being spotted by any enemies, and meeting various otherwise optional conditions established for the mission, such as rescuing a set number of prisoners or destroying a specific type of target.

33. The game is set in the 1980s, allowing for a great degree of mystery regarding the situation that unfolds in the town and providing a reason why the events would not have easily leaked to the world at large.

34. Characters comment, via flashbacks the player is able to access, on the smell of ash.

35. Some of the town's inhabitants remain in the area as sentient balls of light. They do not communicate directly with the player per se, but lead him or her to important areas.

36. As of this writing, numerous Reddit threads exist consisting of players trying to parse the meaning of the sequences. One such example, found here https://www.reddit.com/r/Egttr/comments/3gmxqf/decoding_the_number_stations/, indicates that there is no one consensus for breaking the cipher, save that it does appear to be based on a letter–number substitution code.

37. Wherein A is 1, B is 2, etc. The challenge lies in those instances in which it needs to be determined whether a number is intended to be decoded as a single- or a double-digit unit.

38. As a gamer, I have failed on any number of occasions and while playing many different games. For example, during *The Last of Us,* there is a sequence in which the player takes control of a powerful sniper rifle after defeating the enemy who originally had it. The sniper rifle is set up on the second story of a house that overlooks most of the rest of

the street, including the area where the other characters in the scene—who the player must protect—are gathered. The rifle takes a couple of seconds to reload between shots, meaning that the player needs to establish a sense of timing and rhythm during this section of gameplay. The player must protect the group of characters from two aggressive and sequential waves of enemies: humans and the infected. *The Last of Us*'s narrative is discussed in greater detail later in the book. There are often multiple enemies moving toward these characters at once, and the player must be precise. Whereas one hit from the rifle will either kill or incapacitate an enemy, missing a shot means waiting the reload time and allowing more enemies to converge on the group, leading to the likelihood of failure. In my case, given the intensity of the scene, I failed several times. I was frustrated that I was hindered by my own anxiety from being immersed in the scene and being placed in the role of protector, and that I had trouble strategically picking which enemies to shoot and in what order. I was tempted, at least for a few minutes, to quit entirely. However, the process of rethinking my strategy—of paying closer attention to how things unfolded during the sequence—eventually allowed me to complete the sequence and move on.

39. This consists of *Demon Souls* and *Dark Souls 1–3*. However, *Bloodborne,* created by the same developer, should also be included in a discussion of failure and difficulty. Although *Bloodborne* rewards a more aggressive play style, whereas the *Dark Souls* games tend to reward defense and a more careful approach, *Bloodborne* is still predicated on the idea that the player will fail multiple times throughout the game, often many times in a row while trying to beat a boss.

40. In the case of *Dark Souls 2,* enemies will continue to respawn, meaning they will continue to appear in the exact same areas every time the player goes through them, about 15 times.

Chapter 2

1. *The Witcher* series of video games are based on the novels of the same written by Polish author Andrzej Sapkowski. This analysis focuses solely on the events of the games.

2. In terms of the game's mechanics, *BioShock* features a limited number of unique Splicers, each fitting an overall category or type. More types are introduced as the player proceeds through the game, becoming progressively more challenging to defeat in combat as a result of the player's growing more powerful along the way. Practically, this means that the male Splicers who mutter about following "His commandments" are scattered throughout the game, even though each is considered an individual, not the same Splicer moving from one area to the next. Many female Splicers are found throughout Rapture who sing "Amazing Grace," and so forth.

3. The first *Assassin's Creed* game came out in 2007. Since then, Ubisoft has released a new *Assassin's Creed* game every year, with the exception of 2016. Each game maintains the same overarching structure connecting the modern day and the machinations of Abstergo Industries with a specific historical era. The first games in the series connected a modern-day protagonist to one of his or her ancestors. Later titles, including *Black Flag* and *Syndicate*, eliminated this specific ancestral tie. The three games covered in this chapter all feature Ezio Auditore of Florence as the historical protagonist and his distant blood relative Desmond Miles as the modern-day protagonist. The other titles in the series moved, sometimes significantly, into new areas both historically and geographically.

4. The series has not consistently contained the same degree of balance between its historical and modern-day stories. In *Black Flag,* the modern-day elements took up a more significant amount of gameplay, whereas *Syndicate* eschewed the player moving through the modern day almost entirely.

5. The games themselves, now spanning nine major console/PC games and multiple smaller iterations focusing on narrower storylines or developing with a bit more detail characters from the main series, feature hundreds of hours of compelling storylines, so the summary presented here feels woefully inadequate. The three games featuring Ezio Auditore and Desmond Miles comprise approximately 70–80 hours each for a player who explores the world and completes not only the main missions but also the numerous side quests that round out the story. In the first

games of the series, through *Assassin's Creed: Black Flag*, the modern-day protagonist had to be connected genetically to the person in the past into whose memories he or she entered. Later iterations of the game find Abstergo with the technology to allow anyone to enter the memories they have extracted through the use of the Animus. The precise technological workings of the Animus are harder to determine, but my best explanation is this. Initially, the Animus used a present-day blood relative, such as Desmond Miles, and extracted "genetic memories" from his long-dead ancestors. The machine then transferred the present-day person's consciousness back in time to that ancestor. As Abstergo developed their Animus technology, they could extract genetic memories from one individual and allow others to enter those memories.

6. Subsequent iterations of the games, such as the most recent title *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate,* provide the player with even more complex relationships between self and place. The previous titles generally had limited access points into a given area where an assassination target was located. For example, the player may have entered only through a couple of doors or perhaps descended into a courtyard after accessing the building from a rooftop. Now, players are given a brief montage of options as they approach the target area, allowing for higher degrees of personalization regarding play style. Options include, for example, bribing guards to allow for more direct entry or stealing a key to open an otherwise inaccessible area.

7. In *Assassin's Creed: 2,* there are in excess of 60 different viewpoints.

8. Indeed, the question proves relevant to all of the games in the *Assassin's Creed* series, as they all necessarily truncate, or change, the real-world places they utilize. However, to a large degree, the games focus on accuracy, most especially with regard to the rendering and placement of major buildings and landmarks.

9. Connor is the protagonist of *Assassin's Creed III,* the next game after the three in the Ezio series.

10. A number of news outlets carried the story about the 450,000-word script. I wanted to clarify whether or not this included other found lore in the world, so I contacted the media department of CD Projekt Red. Their media relations representative, Marcin Momot, indicated that the total page count, with all materials considered, is 2,500 pages. His response to me reads, "All the dialogue in the game is voiced, so the approximately 450,000 words pertains to the entirety of the dialogue in the game. In addition to the dialogues, there are about 250,000 words of onscreen text. This includes things like journal and bestiary entries, books, letters, etc. All of this put together translates roughly into 2,500 pages of text," and was received by me on August 2, 2016.

11. Many role-playing style games contain bestiaries, so this is not unique to *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*.

12. Botchlings appear to have been adapted from the Scandinavian creature known as the "myling." The myling is the ghost of an infant who died unwanted and usually without baptism. The 2014 independent video game title *Year Walk* features mylings as a tragic and haunting sight encountered by the player.

13. The best ending, if such a thing is possible with "Family Matters," would be for the Baron to be reunited with Anna and take her into exile so that she may recover from her ordeal with the witches. Their daughter Tamara can be found, but this is not a required part of the quest.

14. In my own playthrough, things did not go well. I attempted to save Anna and the orphans she was caring for from the wrath of the witches. However, while I saved the children, the witches took out their wrath on Anna, transforming her into a hideous creature. Geralt lifts the curse, but the witches planned for this and Anna dies after a brief interaction with the Baron and Tamara. Tamara remains estranged from the Baron. As a result, the Baron commits suicide.

15. *Demon Souls* and the three *Dark Souls* titles share some overarching similarities in both their gameplay and overall settings. All are set in what might best be termed a dark fantasy setting and share a brutally high level of difficulty. *Bloodborne* keeps the same high level of difficulty, but privileges a more aggressive playing style, whereas the previous games favored guarding. *Bloodborne*'s setting is less that of a fantasy world, despite the fantastical beasts inhabiting it, and more that of a twisted Victorian landscape.

16. RPG stands for "role-playing game," and typically tends to refer to those games where a player embodies a specific character in a fantasy setting. The category, especially with modern games, is perhaps a bit imprecise or outdated, given that many games have role-playing elements, as much as they might elements of other genres, like tactical games or puzzle games.

17. Technically, the player can find four pieces of the umbilical cord, even though the game refers to the umbilical cord as broken into three pieces. If the player finds, and then consumes, the complete umbilical cord—meaning three pieces—then he or she unlocks a final, hidden boss. The player comes across only one piece of the cord as part of a standard playthrough, meaning that he or she will come on the first piece after defeating Mergo's wet nurse, one of the game's required boss monsters. The other three pieces are much more difficult to obtain and easily missed. I surmise, then, that three additional opportunities are given for the player to find the two remaining pieces due to this level of difficulty. Each of the four pieces does have its own specific and unique item description, however, so the meticulous player wanting to complete all aspects of the game would be motivated to find all four pieces.

18. Souls are the game's form of currency. They are used to level-up the character and, in the case of souls from defeated bosses like The Rotten, can be traded at certain points to obtain rare and powerful equipment.

19. The history here proves a bit complex. The discovery of ADAM in Rapture, first found as a natural substance in a sea slug inhabiting the ocean floor, has allowed for increasingly dangerous genetic manipulations by Rapture's residents. Eventually, this leads to the creation of the Splicers, so horribly twisted by and addicted to ADAM that they have lost their sanity. Initially, Tenenbaum discovers that girls—and only girls—can serve as hosts to the sea slugs, thus increasing the output of ADAM. Once Rapture descends into chaos, the Little Sisters roam around collecting ADAM from corpses using a specialized needle gun.

20. The player ultimately has the choice to save the Little Sisters or to "harvest," meaning kill, them. The player requires ADAM in the game to obtain necessary power upgrades, called Plasmids. If the player saves a Little Sister, he or she nets a set amount of ADAM, but after saving a certain number of them, Tenenbaum delivers a special, and always very advantageous, set of gifts to the player. If the player harvests a Little Sister, he or she nets more ADAM immediately, but over time, this option only appears to provide the player with an advantage. The player can save all the Little Sisters and, with the addition of Tenenbaum's gifts, is no worse off than the player who harvests them. If the player saves all the Little Sisters, he or she views the "good ending" of the story, which finds Jack finally obtaining what he most desires: a family. If the player harvests one or more of the Little Sisters, he or she receives the "bad ending," which finds the Splicers escaping Rapture and reaching the surface. There are two minor variants on the "bad ending." The first happens if the player harvest only one Little Sister. While the Splicers still escape to the surface with Jack, Tenenbaum's narration of the final events feels more sad and accusatory. In the second of the bad endings, which happens if more than one Little Sister is harvested, Tenenbaum's narration takes on a note of fury toward Jack's, and therefore the player's, choices.

21. The grammatical errors here are as they appear in the audio recording and capture her German-inflected accent.

22. The game takes place during the 1980s, and the tapes that players can find feature songs like "Take on Me" and "The Final Countdown" among a few dozen-plus others.

23. There is some very complicated narrative history here that also requires extensive knowledge of the *Metal Gear* series. To streamline, the player embodies a man who has been surgically altered and then brainwashed into believing that he is Punished Venom Snake, also called the Big Boss in the game. The player does not learn this detail until very late in the game, and even then, the information is accessible only in a mission—Mission 46—if the player has completed all major storyline missions and all the optional side ops that the game marks as "important," and has completely upgraded the Diamond Dogs' base. It is possible, then, for a player to miss one of the required conditions to unlock Mission 46 and therefore never learn his or her true identity in the game.

24. There are two preceding games in the *Danganronpa* series, both of which are marked by a twisted and violent plotline. In those first two games, groups of students are trapped together, first in a school, then on an island, and are forced to participate in a game wherein they must murder one another. The students are promised that if they commit a murder and get away with it, meaning the other students do not successfully identify them as the perpetrator, they can leave. The player, embodying one of the students in each game, oversees a "trial" system wherein the player must listen carefully to testimony, evidence, and alibis given by the others and then must name the killer. *Ultra Despair Girls* changes the initial formula of the first two games a bit to create a third-person shooter game, rather than a point and click-style game.

Chapter 3

1. Any definition of "modern" will necessarily establish arbitrary parameters. In this book, the games selected to serve as examples for analysis date back no further than 2001. Most of the games are relatively recent, released within the last five to six years. However, this does not mean that storytelling was absent from earlier titles, even when technology did not allow for the type of sophistication in mechanics and graphics that modern gamers are accustomed to. For example, *Final Fantasy VII,* originally released in 1997, is rightfully heralded as an early example of an outstanding narrative. One of the game's greatest narrative risks involved the brutal murder of Aerith (sometimes written in early iterations as Aeris) by the game's antagonist Sephiroth. In denial of gamers' expectations, Aerith is not somehow magically resurrected or made whole again. Thus, this book's focus on relatively recent releases should not discourage the digital storytelling scholar from exploring older games as well.

2. Immediately before the game was released, a YouTube user by the name of Playmethrough uploaded a playthrough of the game that took about five hours, including all cut scenes and remaining gameplay. Although it proved to be somewhat inaccurate, it was not by much. My own playthrough did not last longer than eight hours, and I deliberately tried to explore everywhere, even after I realized that there was not much purpose in doing so. Forbes reviewer Paul Tassi, who is quoted in this section of the chapter, claims a playthrough of about seven and a half hours.

3. Although *The Order: 1886* is not a long-form game, it was marketed initially as story-driven, and its short length was kept hidden during its promotion and in the run-up to its release. I've included it in this section as a particular case study of a game that proved highly unpopular because it turned out *not to be* narrative-based.

4. Visual novels are considered in more detail in chapter four.

5. Unfortunately, *P.T.* is no longer available for download because Konami, the publisher, pulled it from the PlayStation Store. See Endnote ix for more information about Konami and Hideo Kojima.

6. The monstrous fetus in this case appears to be in homage to the unsettling film *Eraserhead.*

7. In my own playthrough, I initially had trouble triggering the third laugh. I tried, at first, to follow a guide that had worked for a number of other players, which involved using a gaming headset and sound to trigger the laugh. I had no success with that method, and I seemed to trigger the third laugh completely by chance. Looking back on my playthrough, I cannot determine what I specifically did or did not do on the successful run that allowed me to complete the demo.

8. As has been argued earlier, this book presupposes that a gamer who has gone through the experience of actually playing a game is one who is best able to experience the story the way the game developers would have intended given the platform. Since immersion and agency, at whatever level, are hallmarks of the gaming experience, this book assumes that the player has worked through the game, even if he or she has sought help. The "Let's Play" video market has grown substantially, with popular YouTube users, such as PewDiePie, garnering millions of hits per video. That audience certainly consists of those who are watching for help, those who are watching instead of playing the game directly, and those who watch strictly for entertainment as well as some combination thereof. Although people

exist who only watch "Let's Play" videos and do not play themselves, for the purposes of this book, they may gain an understanding of the game's story by paying close attention, but they would otherwise fail to meet a reasonable definition of being a gamer.

9. The 2 part DLC series for *BioShock Infinite* titled "Burial at Sea" is one such example. The narrative arc explored in the DLC brings to a definitive end Elizabeth's storyline, which began in the game proper. In keeping with the overall dark themes explored in *BioShock Infinite,* "Burial at Sea" concludes with Elizabeth dying in Rapture, in keeping with the idea that however much she dreams of an escape to Paris, it is never to be.

10. *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* is a compelling post-9/11 exploration of war and violence and is explored elsewhere in this book. It is unlikely that the game will be associated with any DLC releases, regrettably, due to the public and acrimonious break between game developer Konami and its director/writer/creator, Hideo Kojima, shortly before the game's release. This break also sent into limbo the next title in the *Silent Hill* series, for which *P.T.* served as sort of teaser trailer/demo of the new game engine that was to be used.

11. It is important to note that DLC modules are available that do not deal much at all with storytelling or add to the main narrative. For example, some DLC focuses simply on combat-related elements, or other elements that are enjoyable for players, but that are not story-based. For example, the main purpose of *Fallout 4*'s March release of the DLC *Automatron* was to give players the ability to craft and customize their own robots for use as companions, NPCs, to accompany the main player on exploration and quests, but had little in the way of new story-based quests. The primary new quest given to players functioned as a means to introduce the robotics mechanic. This stands in contrast to *Fallout 4*'s May release of the DLC "Far Harbor," which introduces an entire new area to the map and contains about 20 hours of new story-based material.

12. I am the first to both admit and lament that the titles selected here for specific and more in-depth analyses are woefully few when considered against all of the great storytelling in gaming. I have therefore selected titles not only that I have played, as has been a point of emphasis since the introduction of this book, but that are diverse across story style, genre, and the like.

13. The lighthouse is both a location and a symbol in all three of the *BioShock* games. Elizabeth expresses this importance powerfully at the end of *BioShock Infinite* when she observes, "There's always a lighthouse. There's always a man. There's always a city." Whether this will prove to be the structure of subsequent *BioShock* titles remains to be seen.

14. The plot of *BioShock Infinite* is complex in its extrapolation of quantum physics elements. The game reveals that a pivotal event in Booker DeWitt's life happens when he opts either to be baptized in a born-again Christian ceremony or to refuse the baptism. The DeWitts, along infinite timelines, who choose to be baptized refashion themselves as Prophet Zachary Hale Comstock. The Comstocks seem all, to a man, to become tyrannical, despotic, and capable of shocking cruelty. The DeWitts appear destined to become mired in gambling debt and alcoholism. The reasons for this are complicated but form the backbone of the entire narrative. Comstock, with the help of the scientific genius of Rosalind and Robert Lutece, obtains the ability to open what the game deems "Tears" in the space-time fabric. Since Comstock is sterile, he uses one such Tear to arrange to buy DeWitt's daughter Elizabeth, technically of Comstock's own genetic stock.

15. The other two choices are an option to kill a ticket clerk in Battleship Bay who is clearly setting up Booker and Elizabeth to be captured and an option to kill or leave alive Cornelius Slate, a major character during the "Hall of Heroes" segment of the game. I have analyzed Cornelius Slate in depth in my article "*BioShock Infinite*: The Search for Redemption and the Repetition of Atrocity" published as a chapter in *The Play Versus Story Divide in Game Studies: Critical Essays*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2016.

16. *BioShock Infinite* is a required text in a few classes that I teach. Some students who have played the game have panicked and have let the timer run out. All of the remaining students have thrown the ball at the emcee, save for students who had played the game at least

once before and wanted to see if throwing the ball at the couple made any narrative difference. None of the students have thrown the ball at the couple for any other reason, including for amusement, and all of them found doing so repugnant.

17. Tellingly, once Booker meets Elizabeth and she becomes an important part of the narrative, she is never referred to as a girl again. The mission tags change to refer to her by name. In many ways, this is indicative of how the story plays with gender expectations. Elizabeth, who some players may have initially expected to be either weak or unimportant, turns out to be integral to the narrative, and for some players, perhaps even more compelling as a character than Booker himself. The tragedy of the story is hers, yet she refuses to be a victim.

18. Elizabeth can technically create Tears herself, but Comstock has been using a device called the Siphon to drain part of her power. Up until the closing moments of the game, when the Siphon is destroyed, Elizabeth cannot access her full powers, and because the Siphon was built when she was young, she has only vague memories of creating Tears.

19. In the final DLC *Burial at Sea, Part 2,* the player embodies Elizabeth.

20. Salts replenish the player's ability to use Vigors, magic-like powers akin to the first two *BioShock*s' use of Plasmids.

21. This is where the game's stretching of quantum physics begins to make any interpretation of these events utterly complicated. I have had a number of debates about the events of the DLC modules with other players as we have attempted to determine *how many* Elizabeths are in those games and which ones they might be, meaning which of them, if any, are the same Elizabeth from *BioShock Infinite*'s main narrative.

22. Very briefly, for a few minutes at the very start of the game, the player embodies Joel's daughter Sarah.

23. A portion of this paragraph has been adapted from a previous article of mine published in *Games and Culture.*

24. The portion of the chapter beginning here and dealing with morality in *The Last of Us* is excerpted from a previous article of mine published in *Games and Culture.* The full citation appears in the Works Cited pages. The sections adapted into this book chapter are not identical to the original article, as I have made alterations and additions as needed to fit the inclusion of that work here.

25. In all of my playthroughs of the game, I never killed the medical staff. The fact that they were no threat was an issue to me, as was the fact that I was more concerned and invested in rescuing Ellie and getting out of that room and further away from my pursuers. This is where the issue of player agency becomes such a fascinating component of digital storytelling. I despised the hypocrisy of the Fireflies. However, I did not think that it justified me, as Joel, shooting unarmed people to make some sort of larger point about that.

26. An HD release of *Silent Hill 2* and *Silent Hill 3* for the PlayStation 3 that came out in 2012 did little to improve the overall textures of the game. While some scenes were lightened and clarity provided to some areas of the game, this was not the case for other scenes. Unfortunately, the HD editions are also marked by glitches and technical flaws, such as an area of the game that was lightened, with some fog removed from the original version, only to then reveal what are essentially the in-game map boundaries. Therefore, it truly remains impossible to determine how different the game might have looked if it had been created today for today's current generation platforms. Given that the HD editions did keep much of the dirty or blood- or rust-colored environments, it is logical to assume that the instability of the environment itself is an essential component of the narrative.

27. Pyramid Head, for those familiar with the *Silent Hill* game series and the two film adaptations, became an inherent part of the franchise after the release of this game. It is in *Silent Hill 2*, however, that the character is first introduced, and his presence has true symbolic meaning.

28. There are six endings for the game, but two of these are joke endings. In one, James discovers that a dog has been controlling the events of Silent Hill from a control room the entire time. The "UFO" ending finds James shot during an alien encounter. That leaves four endings connected to the narrative. Of these, three can be obtained during the first playthrough of the game. The final ending, "Rebirth," is possible to achieve only after

completing the game once and meeting other more complicated requirements. IGN's website has a clear breakdown of the in-game circumstances that must be in place to gain a specific ending: http://www.ign.com/wikis/silent-hill-hd-collection/Silent_Hill_2_Endings.

29. Conservatively, I estimate that I spent 80–100 hours for each of the three games.

30. The player is not required to enter into a romance. Some characters, such as Mordin, will not romantically engage with any iteration of Shepherd. If the player does choose to enter into a romance, that romance has the potential to continue through all three games of the series. However, the player may opt to split up with a romantic partner and choose a different one.

31. What this means is that the player who continues on to *Mass Effect 3* will have to start the character creation process over again for that game. The Shepherd that existed through the player's molding of events throughout *Mass Effect 1* and *Mass Effect 2* is gone forever.

32. In my initial playthrough, I completed all but one of the loyalty missions. That character, Thane, died during the loyalty mission even though I assigned him the task most suited to his skills. Regarding how the player intersects with the narrative, I attempted the loyalty mission, but failed it. The mission involved a somewhat frustrating set of tasks, and rather than reload a saved game and start the whole mission over, I took my chances.

33. It is possible for Wrex to die during the first game, and as with many of the game's narrative threads, conditions for his survival are dependent on choices the player has been making all along. While the team is exploring the planet Virmire, they discover that Saren, one of the Salarians involved in creating the genophage, may have found a means of inactivating it. Unfortunately, he has also been using his base on Virmire to breed Krogan for war, and the Citadel Council, a ruling body over the various allied races in the game, wants the base destroyed. Wrex is furious at the possibility of losing the means for stopping the genophage and becomes increasingly hostile. To avoid having Shepard or one of Shepherd's other team members kill Wrex, the player must have progressed Shepherd far enough along either the Paragon or Renegade continuum so that Shepherd is able to either make Wrex understand that Saren likely wants to use the genophage cure to continue exploiting the Krogan or intimidate Wrex into standing down. Of note here is that the game does not reward the player whose overall actions appear to run a middle ground because he or she is acting equally good and evil. Game Informer created a flow chart mapping all the possible outcomes of the Suicide Mission and what has to be done or avoided to keep everyone alive here: http://www.gameinformer.com/b/features/archive/2010/06/04/how-to-save-or-kill-your-party-in-mass-effect-2.aspx.

34. It is possible for Mordin to have died in *Mass Effect 2*'s "Suicide Mission." If that is the case, his role will be fulfilled here by another Salarian, one who is not otherwise a major character and has not become a part of Shepherd's core team.

35. *Persona 4: Golden,* released in 2012, is an expanded and reworked version of the *Persona 4* game originally released in 2008.

36. There is an Inaba province in Japan, but this is not intended to be the game's fictional city. Although the setting of the game is culturally and architecturally Japanese, the main locations in the game are fictional.

37. One of the game's frequent events focuses on characters being required to take major exams. At this point, the player is given the option to study intensely for these tests.

38. I use Yukiko as the example here because in my own playthrough, I pursued her and maximized her social bond. The game technically allows the player to flirt with more than one of the female characters; however, this ultimately backfires. The player ends up in a situation in which the female characters find out about one another, and the player must then end the relationships with the others, or with all of them.

39. The game also has additional dungeons and stories that open up when the player completes certain very specific tasks, such as maxing out the Social Link of a mysterious young woman named Marie. While these options certainly add a bit more to the story's overall development, they are not themselves endings or parts of the three core canonical endings, so I have omitted them from the discussion to streamline it, as the game's choice mechanism

regarding the ending is complex enough on its own. There is also a "Golden Ending," but that has the same main narrative closure as the "true" ending.

40. In my initial playthrough, I sided with Sabal. On a personal level, I couldn't allow the civilian population to be used as fodder on the off chance that the particular soldiers involved in the raid would have intel. Amita's logic seemed more flawed to me in this case.

41. In my own initial playthrough, I had come to detest both Amita and Sabal. I ultimately sided with Amita, only because, I personally found Sabal's attitudes toward women detestable. To avoid having to choose and to test how far the limits of choice would go, I attempted to kill both of them at the point of the choice. The game does not allow for this to happen. I then attempted to kill Amita after I had selected to side with her, and the game did not allow that either. I was forced to make a choice and live with consequences I knew were not going to be wholly good.

42. This list of endings does not include the already mentioned option to wait for Pagan Min in the mansion and almost immediately end the game.

43. I admit that in my own initial playthrough, I did kill Amita after the cut scene.

44. The game here changes the characterization of Celebrimbor found in Tolkien's lore. In the lore, Celebrimbor forges a number of the Rings of Power, but not the One Ring Sauron uses to control the others. In the game, Celebrimbor forges the One Ring, and realizes too late that Sauron has betrayed him.

45. In my own initial playthrough, I did not experience much repetition even though I focused a great deal of my attention on going after orcs, rather than focusing on the main narrative. While I did see some names repeat—not in their entirety because orcs have both a first name and a surname serving as a descriptor, as in "Ratbag the Grog Lover—and some visual traits of the orcs repeated, I did not encounter any cases where identical orcs—orcs with the same names, traits, motives, and appearances—appeared in my Nemesis System.

46. The game plays a bit loose with the idea of Talion dying, which really serves more of a purpose to bring defeat to the player and to force the player to reconsider strategy. Technically, Talion is both already dead and bound to a wraith, so he does not really die so much as respawn at the player's closest checkpoint.

47. Ken Levine talks in-depth about his vision for "narrative Legos," the term he gives to components like the randomized orc generator in *Shadow of Mordor* here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=58FWUkA8y2Q.

48. Triberti and his co-authors are also among those who are seeking to make a large connection to moral choices in a video game and how those tie to the player's own personality. Those questions are certainly interesting, but far too complex to address completely here. However, such explorations seeking to connect the player in real life to the character he or she embodies in a given game are not without their peril. Care has to be taken to separate true tendencies—true aggressive tendencies, for example, in a player who always chooses to be evil and lethal in all games wherein that is an option—from preferences that are related to a particular game at a particular moment. For example, a player may opt to play a game such as *InFAMOUS: Second Son* twice, once as good and once as evil, to experience the different skills and the manner in which Seattle's citizens change based on that choice. It may not be correlative to an inherent personality trait of the gamer.

Chapter 4

1. In the case of Josh, the player has been making choices as Josh in each of the sessions wherein the player appears to be directly interacting with a psychiatrist. At the start of the game, nothing seems particularly offkilter about these sessions, even though they have no other immediate sense of context. As the story unfolds, however, it becomes clear that the player has been embodying the psychologically disturbed Josh during these sessions.

2. Carol Clover first explored the concept of what she deemed the Final Girl in her seminal work *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* published in 1993.

3. The other 12 Wendigos are the only survivors of the 30 men who were caught in the mine during a cave-in in 1952. They cannibalized the bodies of the other miners to

survive. The 12 are initially rescued in their human forms, then slowly turn into Wendigos, leading to the slaughter of much of the staff caring for them at the Blackwood Sanatorium, a facility located on the same mountain as the mine and the Lodge. The game adapts the story of the Wendigo from Cree folklore, and the Wendigo curse is said in the game to be unleashed upon the mountain due to the persistent desecration of the land caused by the mining operation.

4. In my initial playthrough, I lost three of the eight characters. Matt, as is discussed in the main body of the book, is very difficult to save without prior knowledge of the steps that need to be taken to avoid his death, and I imagine that many gamers who avoided spoilers related to how to save him likely lost him as well. I lost Ashley in large part because I did not heed a very specific clue one of the other characters gives about the Wendigos: they imitate human voices. At one point, Ashley believes that she hears the missing Jessica begging for help, and she is subsequently killed by a Wendigo. I lost Mike toward the very end of the game for reasons that I can only ascribe to the intensity of the scene. The remaining survivors are trapped on the ground floor of the Lodge with several Wendigos. Because the Wendigos track by sound, the player, embodying Sam throughout the sequence, has to keep motionless by not moving the controller, several times. The Wendigos are vulnerable to fire, so the ultimate plan is to use an electric light switch to start a fire, exploiting a gas leak that will destroy the Lodge and the creatures. On the penultimate choice, I told Mike to flip the switch without realizing that he would not have time to reach the front door, some distance away, before the fire ignited.

5. Chris's possible deaths are more complicated in that he has to run some distance toward the safety of the Lodge with a Wendigo in pursuit. At various points while he is fleeing, the player has to successfully aim a shotgun and hit the Wendigo. This stuns, but not does not kill, the Wendigo long enough to allow Chris to get past. If the player misses any of those shots, the Wendigo will kill Chris before he reaches the Lodge.

6. I have used both *The Walking Dead* and *Life Is Strange* as "texts" in my courses. Students who are not traditionally gamers and were initially intimidated at the thought of playing a game for class found these both to be wonderful storytelling experiences, and they liked that the learning curve was not steep.

7. I extrapolate here a bit on my own playthrough. I opted to take the picture because I could not logically reason how a confrontation with an adult was going to help Max or Kate. I also worried that such an action might actually get Kate into more trouble. I also believed that the photograph would be more valuable, as I thought that David might lie about confronting Kate.

8. Unfortunately, Kate committed suicide in my first playthrough. I did not confront David, and I told Kate to wait before going to the police. That led to my dialogue choices proving to be far more complicated and nuanced, and I answered two of them incorrectly.

9. In my initial playthrough, I opted to sacrifice Chloe. Although I felt bad for Chloe's plight and how the death of her father unraveled her entire life, my pity for her went only so far. I found her to be arrogant, prone to violence, and no more resolved of her issues at the end of the game than she had been at the beginning. As a player, I spent a great deal of time in Arcadia Bay and got to know many of its residents. I could not reconcile how all of their lives were worth Chloe having back the one she had recklessly thrown away.

10. The television series itself is based on *The Walking Dead* graphic novels.

11. This is technically the same Hershel who exists in the television series, but the characterization is different.

12. The oddities in spacing and punctuation reflect the titles of the games as they were intended by the developers and released in that form.

13. *Steins;Gate* possesses a very complex narrative that is also largely unexplained. The events have to be taken at face value by the player, and the game also features a large supporting cast of characters. For the sake of a coherent analysis, I streamlined the plot to its core points and those that led to the game's "true" ending.

14. In my first playthrough, I achieved the chapter 6 ending. Okabe and Suzuha, a young

woman who has traveled back in time to try to prevent World War III, decide to go further back into the past together to try to alter the timeline from there, as they have otherwise been unsuccessful. The ending provides a melancholy note to the story, as Okabe observes that both he and Suzuha will lose their memories of everyone they know in the present.

15. In my own initial playthrough, I did not consult any play guides or spoiler sites, so I did not know in advance how many total chapters or how many possible endings the game contained. I received the early chapter six ending on that first playthrough, and although I felt that the game seemed to come to an abrupt end, the ending itself provided a cohesive sense of narrative closure. It would have been easy to have missed how much more story the game had to offer.

16. This is a localization error in the translation and should read "me" for grammatical correctness. I've maintained the quote as it appears in the game.

17. Okabe references a "two-day loop" here, but I suspect this may be an error in the overall translation of this section. Okabe specifically loops the one day where he and his friends enjoy the bike ride. He doesn't loop two separate days. I think that the use of "two days" here denotes the fact that he is trying to loop the one day to avoid going to the next, where tragedy occurs. There is also a grammatical error in the passage as it appears in the game—Okabe says "like I" when it should be "like me." I have left the error as it appears in the game.

18. One final character, a 12-year-old named Sorata Suzuhara, acts as an external observer to the romances, but is not a participant. While he initially believes that he has been somehow transported to the past, he has really been kept in stasis and wakes up far into the future.

19. The plot is really more fantasy than science fiction, and the narrative does not explain elements, such as gifting god-like powers to humans, with any degree of specificity.

20. The game presents the title as one word, *Fingerbones,* as opposed to the common usage in which it is split into two words.

21. My own reading of the game's events leads me to conclude that Esther is his child, but enough uncertainty permeates the narrative that I cannot definitely point to her dying in utero or as a young girl. The game presents a sonogram and a photograph of a young girl as evidence. However, neither proves definitive in that the photo of the young girl can easily represent his hopes for the child who never had the chance to be born.

22. On a humorous note, on my first playthrough, I went the wrong way and got "stuck" in part of the landscape. This can happen sometimes as an in-game glitch. Mercifully, so that I did not have to start from the beginning, I died at that point and was able to start from the point just prior to the glitch.

23. It is at this point that the full complexity of a game with interrelated but randomly generated text pieces is worth noting. There are places in the landscape where the player comes upon broken parts of cars, and then what appear to be pieces of a wrecked car with candles around them, as though they are altars or sacred spaces. Given that some of these pieces appear to be brake components, it is certainly possible to argue that Esther may have died in a car crash caused by a failure of the car's brakes. However, given that all variations of the story contain symbols representing alcohol and dopamine, the narrative shifts away from brake failure as an explanation. The brake components may indicate, as an example, that one or both of the drivers attempted to brake but were unable to avoid the accident.

24. In my first playthrough of Act 4, I opted to explore the map room. In so doing, I eventually had the chance to keep one of three maps: an old one, a torn one, and a new one. I selected the old one, but its use was not explored in Act 4. I hope to see how my particular map may provide me with exploration options in the final act of the game.

25. The fate of Weaver is a main plot point in the game and is not resolved as of Act 4. Weaver disappears from the farm during Conway's visit there, and her sister Shannon only finds vague clues as to her location. In Act 4, the player learns that Weaver has been creating and broadcasting strange and even incomprehensible messages that seem, overall, to be warnings. While the final act of the game will hopefully fully clear up the mystery of Weaver, my speculation now is that she is

trying to warn people about their precarious financial positions. There is some hint that she previously helped workers at the Hard Times distillery pay off their ballooned and imagined debts to their employers, so it seems logical to assume that she represents an advocate for those swallowed up or victimized by the financial system.

26. The fate of Ezra's parents remains murky. Ezra claims that he and his brother Julian were exploring, and when they returned, their parents were gone. However, especially in Act 4, the narrative leans much more toward the idea that their parents are dead.

Chapter 5

1. I have not yet included *BioShock 2* because of concerns about access and about requiring students to purchase three games. I also hesitate because playing three games in a semester may prove too time consuming. My lack of including the game has nothing to do with the quality of the game, and it troubles me that many gamers find *BioShock 2* to be a lesser title. Nothing could be further from the truth, as it bookends nicely with the first game in its exploration of morality. Where *BioShock* explores objectivism and its disdain for altruism, *BioShock 2* features a primary antagonist who claims to be altruistic, but is morally bankrupt. The games, taken together, explore moral systems and their failure in application. I will likely test requiring students to play all three *BioShock* titles in forthcoming semesters to gauge whether the time commitment is feasible for the average student, especially for those who are not avid gamers.

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