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Building the character: Imagined consciousness in roleplaying videogames

Abstract:

Media scholars often claim that videogamers are co-authors with designers/writers of videogame narratives. Yet in most videogames, authorship is illusory, a series of procedural choices whose outcomes are pre-programmed. However, invested gamers invent an ‘imagined consciousness’ of their player-characters, one that maintains character consistency and helps gamers not to author game narratives, but revise them. There is tension between gamer-playing-game and gamer-roleplaying-character caused by competing desires for gameplay experiences, but conscious negotiation of creative/inventive and readerly roles can reveal player agency, and enhance the pleasure of narrative videogaming experiences.

Biographical note:

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‘The choices are all yours,’ declares Bethesda Game Studios, developer of the roleplaying game *Fallout 4*. On the topic of ‘freedom and liberty’ in the same title, Bethesda claims, ‘Do whatever you want’ and ‘Be whoever you want’. Of *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, developer CD Projekt RED promises, ‘You chart your own path to adventure’ and ‘you set your own goals and choose your own destinations’. Now, in *Fallout 4*, I neither recall choosing to have my (in-game) son taken away from me nor choosing to attempt to get him back. Also I’d like, just on occasion, to bend over to touch my toes, but it’s not going to happen. I can be *anyone*? How about a super mutant! Nope. (But – spoiler alert – you can travel with one.) As for *The Witcher 3*, while ‘you chart your own path to adventure,’ *the very next sentence* on the website reads, ‘You play as a bounty hunter.’ Ah. So I chart my own path as long as I’m a bounty hunter. Got it. And I set my own goals, but I’ll ‘take on [my] most important contract – to track down the child of prophecy, a key and weapon which can save or destroy all.’¹ (Having played *The Witcher 3*, I don’t need to go anywhere other than to the destinations in game – so marvellous, so magnificent, so thrilling ... still, I couldn’t precisely choose my own.) I’m not one to immediately believe every enticing marketing claim. But it’s not unusual for undergraduates to enthusiastically and genuinely respond, ‘You can be anything,’ when I ask why they’re so drawn to videogames. Actually, you can’t.

That *sense* of radical freedom, though, is seductive. In early² videogame research, scholars (repeatedly) maintained that players are co-authors (with game designers/writers) in their games’ unfolding narratives. Espen Aarseth wrestles with the possibility that electronic documents can ‘force the responsibility of authorship onto the reader/user’ (Aarseth 1997: 165). Lev Manovich discusses the ‘closer relationship between authors and readers’ and the ‘overlap between producers and users [that] becomes significantly larger’ when dealing with ‘new media’ (Manovich 2001: 119). And Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin refer to the possibility in hypertext that the ‘reader takes on some of the characteristics traditionally assigned to the author’ (Bolter and Grusin 1999: 248). The argument goes something like this: gamers forge their own narrative paths through videogames, creating a ‘new’ (‘unique?’) text based on the particular choices they make (through dialogue options and character actions) that is influenced by the extremely varied character combinations available to them (different genders, self-determined attributes, character classes, moral alignments, races, professions, species and so forth) and formed by fulfilling missions and completing quests in often flexible temporal order. Gamers certainly understand the *feeling* of authoring their own experiences through gameplay, where the narrative appears to unfold based on their choices. The very world is influenced by their, well, influence. Remarkably, these trailblazing scholars were writing in extremely early days of sophisticated videogaming – past *Pitfall!* and *Zork, Hero’s Quest* (that is, *Quest for Glory*, post trademark debacle) and *The Bard’s Tale*, but during the releases of *Baldur’s Gate* and *Planescape: Torment* (academic publication lag time being what it is makes it unlikely these scholars had experienced *anything like* these latter titles). Fast forward a couple of decades, and even in today’s roleplaying games like *Fallout 4* and *The Witcher 3*, authorship is illusory, a series of procedural choices whose outcomes are pre-programmed. Oh, I know – *what pre-programming it is!* But still.

Aarseth, Manovich, Bolter and Grusin and others were nevertheless onto something. Despite perhaps slightly overly-excited claims of co-authorship in electronic media, videogames – and I would posit roleplaying videogames in particular – complicated authorial and readerly relationships to the point that it was clear that previously-established theory was not quite up to the task of explaining just what we had stumbled into. On the one hand, gamers' interaction prompts the story to unfold. On the other, the game's rules, programming parameters, and predetermined narrative outcomes limit gamers' actual *authority*. Game designers also influence user response, motivating one action or another, manipulating gamers by consciously exploiting conventional gaming strategies, behaviours, and desires. What's more, videogames introduce to the holy trinity of reader-author-text (gamer-designer-game) another element, another mediated 'layer' that needs to be negotiated: the avatar, the player-character, the protagonist that the gamer embodies within gamespaces. The quaternity of gamer-avatar-designer-game, in which, I argue, agency is in constant flux, enables a kind of posthuman identity described by N. Katherine Hayles:

The presumption that there is an agency, desire, or will belonging to the self and clearly distinguished from the "wills of others" is undercut in the posthuman, for the posthuman's collective heterogeneous quality implies distributed cognition located in disparate parts that may be in only tenuous communication with one another (Hayles 1999: 3-4).

We can locate, though, if not isolate, creative agency in videogames in the form of an elaborate, personal, imaginative landscape constructed by each inspired player which makes roleplaying games (in particular) so compelling. Gamers invent an imagined consciousness of the player-character which serves as the 'psyche' that maintains character consistency (especially at moments when gamers lament, '*My character simply wouldn't do that*'). The tension between gamer-playing-game and gamer-roleplaying-character is caused by competing desires within the gameplay experience that require negotiation between creative/inventive and readerly roles. *Authority* rests where these elements intersect, itself ultimately an act of negotiation between personae. In roleplaying videogames, the limitation of creative agency, however initially vexing, is simultaneously what motivates agency and makes it apparent.

The illusion of choice

I was struck by a post on a *Fallout 3* blog, in which the author, Natasha, quotes a lengthy portion of dialogue from *Shivering Isles*, an expansion pack for *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*. In it, Shegorath, the Daedric Prince of Madness (essentially, we might think of the Daedra in *The Elder Scrolls* series much as we might the deities of Greek mythology) is speaking to the player-character, who has entered his realm. Here is a significantly truncated version:

Shegorath: 'Now, to the reason for your being here, and the likely cause of your death.'

Player Character: 'What do you mean?'

S: 'You'll be stopping the Greymarch. [...] You'll be my champion. [...]

PC: 'How can I become a Daedric Prince?'

S: '...A fair question. [...]'

PC: 'Where will you be?'

S: 'Not here. [...]'

PC: 'What's next?'

Natasha describes the dialogue as follows:

The player character, like Neo in the *Matrix* series of films, is relegated to the role of prompter for the NPC's^[3] dialogue. In *Oblivion*, dialogue is simply a way of making quest-related information entertaining. Very occasionally your character will be given several choices of how to respond, but these choices are simplistic: you might have one mean response, one nice response, and one indifferent response. Dialogue is never included for the sake of character development, and you are never given the chance to portray your character's personality – beyond 'my character is mean' or 'my character is not mean'. *Oblivion* has many other strengths, and this dialogue system works for what it is intended to do: convey information. But it works to that end alone (Natasha 2007).

Natasha captures how in this gaming moment the 'co-authorship' that has been celebrated by scholars is abruptly taken away, even as it attempts to maintain the illusion of player control, by instigating what Natasha understandably deems irrelevant 'options'. While this dialogue is carefully selected to fit Natasha's point (there are other dialogue sequences in *Oblivion* that are not quite so linearly constructed), it serves as a representative example of a type of dialogue progression in *Oblivion* in particular, and roleplaying games more generally. Other games – examples of which I describe below – operate on the other end of the spectrum, where dialogue options present choices with serious consequences for the game's plot. Still other games rest in-between: for instance, generally speaking, the *Mass Effect* series dialogue choices are based on gamers shaping their player-characters' degree of meanness or niceness, aggression or diplomacy – as Natasha describes – but with consequence: initiating or denying access to various quests/missions, enabling or disabling future character interactions/relationships, or even contributing to how the game's narrative ends.

Natasha's criticism of *Oblivion* reveals tension between the gamer's expectation (that choices presented should be meaningful, which is to say, have impact), the player-character's persona as envisioned by the gamer (how my character might behave), and the designer's motive (exposition). These agents do not always get along: 'Play the way you want,' the designer says to the gamer (as long as it's within our framework). 'It's MY character,' the gamer says to the designer (but it must interact with a pre-programmed environment that is by necessity the same for millions of other gamers). In terms of roleplaying within narrative gameplay, a problem manifests in the player-character, sandwiched between game designers and gamers, the site of a power struggle in which the opposing sides share the same goal: a gamer's player-character should interact with the game designer's world in whatever way the gamer desires. Robin Woods captures the friction between identity-freedom and roleplay in narrative videogames: 'Dialogue options are, of course, the central way in which personality and

personal history are imposed on a player character, and they determine the voice with which the character – and to some degree the player behind the character – speaks’ (Woods 2005: 229). Through the player-character, always trapped in part by game designers’ unavoidable (with current technology) limitations, gamers themselves are subjugated, like a reader frustrated by a novel whose use of the second-person never really seems to work. Woods quotes one gamer who had recently played and reviewed a gamer-authored *Neverwinter Nights* module: ‘The only negative experience I had was with the dialog. I’m not sure if I can really explain it, but it just didn’t feel right. I often had to choose dialog I felt my character would never dream of saying’ (Woods 2005: 228-229). The point, I think, is just when we begin to lose ourselves in our roleplaying characters, begin to own or become them, experience them as an extension of the or alternative self, the dialogue (or the game writers and programmers, if we prefer) rips us from the experience, like the ear-splitting volume of some dreadful commercial that disrupts a poignant moment in our favourite television drama in which we had just lost ourselves. Or, to put it in Bolter and Grusin’s terms, the desired transparent immediacy of the experience instantly becomes one of hypermediacy (Bolter and Grusin 1999: 21, 31).

In addition to exposition-posing-as-dialogue, videogames also create the illusion of choice through action and more complicated narrative development. I recall exploring *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* for untallied hours. Having immersed myself in this town and the next, explored this wilderness and the one beyond, interacted with tens and then hundreds of NPCs, completed many of the quests they assigned or favours they requested, I eventually uncover a way into the Dark Brotherhood, a guild of professional assassins which I had been pining to join. I fulfil one contract and then another. Complete one mission and then more. Finally, I locate a Dark Brotherhood sanctuary in the basement of an abandoned house in the city of Cheydinhal. There I meet eight characters with whom I speak, learning their histories, getting their advice, trading goods with them. Their Sanctuary becomes my sanctuary, hidden and protected from the dangerous outside world. I find – my player-character finds – that I’m at home here. Its inhabitants, my family. But all is not well, for when I encounter Lucien Lachance, a speaker for the Black Hand, the ruling council of the Dark Brotherhood, I am told that there is an assassin in the Cheydinhal Sanctuary (an assassin of assassins), and I am charged with eliminating this infiltrator. The plan? To slay the whole Cheydinhal crew, perform a ‘purification,’ as the Black Hand refers to it, because the Brotherhood as a Greater Whole cannot afford to take any chances. (Indeed, they can’t – that’s the reason it was so challenging to get to this point in the first place.) If I carry out Lachance’s task, then I betray my comrades and destroy the Sanctuary, but the game’s progressive narrative will continue (that is, I will receive additional missions, advance in the Brotherhood’s ranks, unfold more storyline). If I do not carry out Lachance’s task, then the Sanctuary and my colleagues will remain, technically, but they will stagnate, repeating the same lines of dialogue that I have already heard and remaining inert, sterile, vacant – like a loved one on life support ... there-but-not-there; physically present, but fundamentally absent; their bodies intact, but their stories over. Even if I can discover the infiltrator, I cannot eliminate her or him alone, as the very close-knit nature of the group that made them so appealing is precisely what requires

the elimination of them all: kill one, and the rest will instantly attack, not pausing to listen to reason. Believe me, I tried.

While Natasha's *Oblivion* dialogue offers an example of false agency, the character merely advancing dialogue, other quests offer choice, but without control (which may seem to constitute irrelevant choices). Still, in *Oblivion*, the gamer *can* make the 'choice' of not killing the Brotherhood party, but then that storyline no longer advances. Ultimately, the desire for story induces the player to act, even if that action is against the player's desires, and the player-character's ... er ... character. If we were to imagine some AI technology, though, that would allow for a truly *unique* player-character who speaks and behaves precisely how the gamer desires, it might be revealed that it's not at all actually desirable. Part of the pleasure of reading (listening) to a story is being taken to somewhere one hasn't been, to experience other selves, other motives, other choices, other perspectives. Games not reliant on narrative *approach* this condition (a sandbox-style game), but narratives (and therefore narrative-driven games) rely on the unexpected, the surprising, the serendipitous, situated inside a meaningful sequence. If the sequence is meaningful, then it is unmindful to ignore the pleasure in being forced to choose, pleasure present even *within* frustration. These situations feel oddly 'real' (which gamers claim to value): we are often forced into actions that we find distasteful⁴. We might enjoy an 'inner conflict', especially if we know that consequences are light. It feels complex and morally challenging. The sort of 'forced choice' apparent in my *Oblivion* example is less jarring than the bit of idiotic dialogue in Natasha's (with whom I whole-heartedly agree ... I remember that sequence, and was equally as put off by it). Roleplaying videogames offer their players enormous agency when they initially *create* their highly-customisable characters, but that agency is compromised when the character must engage the circumstances that the game conjures. And that's part of the fun.

Choice with consequence

Roleplaying games rely on the *illusion* of control. Game designers certainly plan for precise sets of circumstances, setting the player up, relying on how they know many gamers play, and thereby potentially heightening the pleasure that comes from having the illusion of control abruptly taken away. The game designers anticipate, then challenge, then reinforce the conventional forced choice that is familiar in roleplaying videogames. The game reasserts its control over the player even while *seemingly* granting the player control. Consider the following example from *Fallout 3*.

It is two-hundred years after the Great War, the Big One, the nuclear holocaust that brought a stunning end to life as it was, civilisation as we knew it. After being raised in a sophisticated, subterranean bomb shelter constructed by Vault-Tec Corporation before the war, the soon-to-be Lone Wanderer ... the Vault Dweller ... your player-character ... your avatar ... *you* emerge from the relative comfort and security of the underground into the Capital Wasteland, what remains of Washington, D.C. after its nuclear annihilation. You are in search of your father (James is his name, and is voice-acted by Liam Neeson, if you'd like to know), who suddenly left the Vault without explanation. As the Lone Wanderer, you explore the Capital Wasteland, interacting

with its inhabitants, making decisions and initiating actions that have repercussions beyond your personal experience, and ultimately – should you choose to do so – re-initiating and completing Project Purity, which would provide a purified water source for the entire region. Water sources are, in the world of *Fallout*, notoriously radioactive.

During your travels, in one optional game sequence, the player-character arrives at Tenpenny Tower, a high-rise apartment complex, still standing and occupied by ‘upper-crust’ society members managing to maintain a comparative life of luxury in the post-apocalyptic landscape. The player-character encounters Roy Phillips, a ‘ghoul’ – a member of a ‘species’ of long-living, severely irradiated, zombiesque, *literal* post-humans, who, while grossly disfigured, nevertheless are as civilised and intelligent as any other members of *Fallout* culture, and a great deal more so than some. Phillips is attempting to gain entry to Tenpenny Tower for himself and a handful of his fellow ghouls, but is denied because of their ghoulishness (a reenactment, to be certain, of the government-sanctioned racial segregation that characterised one of United States history’s most dreadful chapters, fittingly, perhaps, given the game’s Washington, D.C. setting). Further investigation uncovers that the occupants of Tenpenny Tower are largely and conventionally prejudiced against the ghouls, thinking them all ‘feral’ (a term that describes only a distinct type of ghoul which has lost all capacity for reason, due to extreme radiation poisoning). The Chief of Security at Tenpenny offers the player-character a reward for killing the ghoul community’s leader (Phillips). Speaking with Phillips presents an alternative solution: help the ghouls gain access to Tenpenny, and they will massacre the tower’s present inhabitants. In my own gameplay, I was – I hope understandably – not amenable to either option, as my and my player-character’s moral compass points in a different direction.

It seemed, though, that *Fallout 3* had presented me with a familiar, forced, binary choice: ghouls or humans. I opted, for the time being, to do nothing. Interestingly, not long after, a third, non-violent solution manifested: convince the ghouls not to attack and persuade the humans that the ghouls will be peaceful, productive, and kindly new co-tenants. The diplomatic choice was a no-brainer for me. The ghouls were thankful and delighted to move in. While a few of the more intolerant human residents elected at that time to depart Tenpenny Tower, the majority was pleased with their new neighbours, and it was lovely to see humans and ghouls living in harmony and, by post-apocalyptic standards, affluence. Lovely, indeed – perhaps too lovely for the Capital Wasteland, as it turns out. I discovered, upon a later return to Tenpenny Tower, that there had been a ‘misunderstanding’ during which all humans had been slaughtered and subsequently dumped in the tower’s basement: ‘No one is fully innocent or guilty in the wasteland,’ Phillips explained, directing his comments to me in no uncertain terms. This portion of the story concluded, the peaceful outcome that I had sought and thought I had achieved was jarringly revealed to be specifically *not* a possibility. I found myself taken aback and certainly emotionally involved on several levels. I regretted my decision, somewhat, given the outcome. I reflected upon the seemingly justified prejudice against the ghouls, yet recognised that the horrific actions were perpetrated only by one of them (Phillips emphatically, it seems, acted alone, if others did not condemn the action). And I appreciated the fabulous and unexpected plot twist of the game.

Even when presented with a choice that is in harmony with a player-character's personality, the game can still problematise the situation. Motivations, goals, and outcomes can be complex, potentially even elusive. Even when presented with a choice whose outcome is contrary to that desired, there is still the pleasure that the choice still mattered: I experienced enormous joy in discovering the diplomatic solution and seeing it through. Despite the end result being the same as if I had agreed to murder the humans initially, I was still delighted: the *story and its moral implications* were different (Phillips emerges as a kind of lone terrorist instead of me acting as a mercenary, killing a population for gain). And that's because I don't have complete freedom, control, agency. But that doesn't mean these cannot be had.

Making creative agency apparent

Roleplaying videogames introduce a 'problem' in narrative development not only in narrative 'gaps' like those in traditional texts, which Wolfgang Iser addresses with reader response theory, but also in character contradictions in which the player-character is forced into particular speech acts, behaviours, and (sometimes) thoughts. I say *contradictions* because in many roleplaying games the character is supposed to be *your character* or even *you*⁵. Aarseth refers to numerous scholars – working in the 1980s and early '90s, and therefore, I should note, only able to access the types of adventure games available then – who reference Iser's engagement with reader response theory, and specifically the notion of semantic gaps inherent in literary works 'that the reader must fill' (Aarseth 1997: 110), largely to satisfy the reader's 'desire for consistency'⁶ (Iser 1989: 27). These scholars argue (Aarseth reports rather vaguely) that games also have a 'narrative vacancy, which must be filled by the reader for the "text" to continue' (Aarseth 1997: 110). Aarseth points out that 'the "openings" of determinate cybertexts are not gaps, in Iser's sense, since they are not used to complement the written parts in a game of imagination; rather, they are used as a filter, in which only the "correct" response lets the user proceed through the text'. Aarseth uses 'keyholes' rather than 'gaps' as an apt metaphor for this kind of vacancy (although I am convinced that a game could have *both*), for the 'keys' used either 'advance the strategic position of the player' or 'don't,' and that 'on a "narrative" level there is no discernible difference' (Aarseth 1997: 111). Aarseth's notion of these spaces that must be filled seems to be a precursor to procedural rhetorics, which Ian Bogost in *Unit Operations* and Mary Flanagan in *Critical Play* have made prominent, and which Miguel Sicart describes as:

...interested in the ways arguments are embedded in the rules of a game, and how the rules are expressed, communicated to, and understood by *a* player. Via their simulation rules, games present embedded values, and it is the players' appropriation and understanding of that model that make a game have meaning (Sicart 2011, emphasis original).

Sicart's main criticism of procedural rhetoric is that proceduralists deny the capacity for players to affect the game with their virtues, to explore what the game proposes by means of their values and political ideas. Players are creative, value-driven agents who engage in play with their own values as part of what helps them configure their

experience. Sicart is concerned with the ethics and politics that gamers bring to the table (the screen). His question seems to be about where *agency* is located. The procedure might dictate and limit choice or discourse or action, but it also enables agency to be apparent to us. The procedure is integral, but not the end of the story. Sicart concludes that ‘play is personal, individual, and communitarian, played with others, for others, in an intensely, deeply *personal* way. And politics and ethics are personal, too’ (2011, emphasis original).

Something more (or *different*, if you prefer) is going on in videogame narratives, with their quaternity, when the merger between gamer-designer-game is complicated by the player-character. Where does the player-character, which is you, but not you, fit? Am I playing as the roleplaying genre invites, to roleplay *my* character, even a version of *me*? If so, I will negotiate the inconsistencies that gameplay throws my way through justifications I create in the imagined consciousness of my player-character. Or am I playing *as* gamer, wanting to see more of the world unfold, hungry for additional adventures and gameplay, even those quests that are ‘out of character?’ The ‘play’ in these ‘roles’ is just that: the continual negotiation that players must do between the subject positions of roleplayer and gamer.

On the one hand, I and my player-character sought desperately for a peaceful solution at Tenpenny Tower; on the other hand, as a gamer, I delighted in being reminded of the mere illusion of narrative control. My player-character wanders away from Tenpenny, disillusioned, conflicted, sad, resigned, wondering what he could have done differently. I sit at my computer desk in genuine surprise, marvelling at the creativity of the game-writers, delighted in a moment of *touché, game-writers, you got me!* I also wonder what I could have done differently, but unlike my player-character, I can figure that out by replaying the scenario – which I did, numerous times, never with the result I desired. After finishing⁷ *Fallout 3*, I consulted the *PRIMA Official Game Guide* (a 752-page tome that attempts to explicate every option, every possibility in *Fallout 3*), which did not offer a peaceful Tenpenny resolution as an actual outcome (Hodgson 2009: 264-270). It seems that the only way to achieve my desired ending would be to choose the path of negotiation between the ghouls and the humans, see the initial peaceful cohabitation that resulted, and then never return to Tenpenny Tower: my desired outcome was only thwarted by my return to the scene. Had I not revisited, I could have left well enough alone, creating a sort of Schrödinger’s Cat scenario, the humans both alive and dead, until I observed what ‘actually’ happened. Still, even if my imagined consciousness had been strong enough to justify never returning *and* disregarding the knowledge I gained of the ghoul’s massacring the human residents in a previous play-through of the scenario, the game designers were, in this case, thorough: the butchery does not happen for forty-eight hours, gametime, which also means that the latest available save game before the Tenpenny debacle could have meant replaying tens of hours. *Touché, game-designers!* (Consider Sicart’s concern with the player’s ethics and values here; the time and effort to replay a sequence, perhaps repeatedly ... worth it for the potential desired outcome?)

As any good readers may, gamers justify narrative and character contradictions by adding annotations, whether mental or written, to their stories in sort of a *midrash* for roleplaying games. So, if my player-character might say, ‘I am fascinated by your story;

please continue,’ but the dialogue option reads, ‘yeah, yeah, get on with it,’ I might maintain character consistency by simply imagining my avatar having hunger pains, needing to get to the next inn for a meal before dark. Or, I might work into my player-character’s history something more complex – a childhood issue that rears its ugly head every now and again. I might not even have to strictly *imagine* these instances, but rather can map them out through an option that some games offer: character histories. In *Neverwinter Nights*, for instance, a ‘character information’ customisation tool allows for this history, input that has no other effect on the game, but serves as a vehicle that will import into the game itself my own thoughts about my character. Yet nobody will read it in the single-player game. Such character histories, one might argue, have no actual ludological impact. But their presence indicates, I think, the importance of this mental projection: the option for a player-character history allows it to be (somewhat ironically) *more* than ideal, existing only in the mind of the player, but ‘actually’ in the game, however tangentially⁸. This seems to me to be a contemporary illustration of Iser’s claim that play ‘allows author-text-reader to be conceived as a dynamic interrelationship’ (Iser 1989: 250), one that requires the act of negotiating sometimes contrary elements, where ‘[a]uthors play games with readers, and the text is the playground’ (Iser 1989: 250).

To return to the example from *Oblivion*, although there is no dialogue, no narrative, no evidence that the traitor was eliminated after the player-character annihilates the Sanctuary, the gamer reconciles the cognitive dissonance created by the conflict between character and behaviour through an act of creativity: for the good of the Dark Brotherhood overall, for its mission to continue, the deed *had to be done*. Or, contrariwise, to ultimately bring about the *downfall* of the Dark Brotherhood, these individuals must be sacrificed in order to ascend the ranks, to cut the head off of this world-poisoning serpent. Either way, perhaps the player-character will walk a bit more slowly for a time, mope, as it were, with head down (in the mind’s eye). Because of the exceptional investment that gamers have in their player-characters, in-game character limitations may be frustrating, but they also allow player-characters to develop as agents immersed in a world they do not control. Additionally, these limitations enable gamers to develop psychological justifications for their player-characters’ particular actions, and thereby cause them to create characters that are more complicated, conflicted, and confused ... and *richer*. In fact, as the example from *Fallout 3* demonstrates, the moments in which the unexpected occurs – in which the game escapes the control of the gamer – have the potential to be the most exciting and most pleasurable, sharply illustrating the ‘shift from the human to the posthuman’, which, as Hayles describes it, ‘evokes terror and excites pleasure’ (Hayles 1999: 4). I contend that players are not, in fact, co-authors; however, I do not believe that gamers can be accurately categorised as conventional readers of a text, either, as they do have some agency regarding the unfolding narrative. The illusion of authorship in videogames is seductive, but remains a series of procedural choices the gamer makes whose outcomes are explicitly programmed into the game⁹. The limitation of creative agency, however initially vexing, is simultaneously what makes it apparent: at Tenpenny Tower, I really did have the satisfaction of making the choice, a kind of satisfaction that I do not always get in life, where I often feel inordinately pulled in particular directions.

The revisionist stance

What I hope the analysis of these roleplaying game sequences indicate is that while we may not be so much the authors of our adventures (in the end, there's not usually *that* much difference in the paths available, but to the invested gamer, even minor differences carry serious weight), and we may not, unless we fill ample vacant spaces with an imagined consciousness, be authors even of our own player-characters beyond character creation (despite all the hype about it being *my* unique character or simply *me*), we can choose how we play, and through being conscious of the possibilities and cognizant of the choices themselves, we can still be creative agents in and of the gameplay experience. The agency available to gamers is achieved if we play the role of co-inventors by exercising our imagined consciousness; we do not author, but we can *revise*. We can take a revisionist stance.

Exploring Skyrim (the place, although the game, *Skyrim*, too), a courier delivered a note to me, inviting me to visit the new museum in Dawnstar: The Museum of the Mythic Dawn. As an avid student of history, I accepted. Upon my arrival, the museum's curator, Silus, greeted me and began showing me the exhibits. The Order of the Mythic Dawn, it turns out, was a Daedric cult known for worshipping Mehrunes Dagon (prince of, among other things, destruction and change); this same cult instigated the Oblivion Crisis, in whose resolution an ancestor of mine was intimately involved. The artefacts Silus showed me were the very ones used in an attempt to topple an empire. He had collected them over many years despite groups emerging whose singular goal was to destroy all evidence and erase all memory of the Order of the Mythic Dawn. One artefact, Mehrunes' Razor, the dagger of the Daedric Prince himself, could not be destroyed, so powerful was its magic. It was instead dispersed, separated into three pieces. And Silus knew where they were. The history lesson, however fascinating by itself, became (perhaps I should have expected), a call for assistance: might I, Silus requested, retrieve them for the museum? While my player-character stifled his enthusiasm, my gamer-self exclaimed, inwardly (okay, possibly outwardly as well, but with cool subtlety), 'Goodness, yes!' In fact, *this very dagger* was in the possession of my ancestor when he was in Morrowind¹⁰, generations ago.

Later, upon returning to Silus with the three pieces I obtained during my travels, he revealed that he had already a fourth piece in his possession, and that we could reassemble the powerful dagger if we went to Mehrunes Dagon's shrine. Off we went. When Silus placed the pieces on the shrine, a booming voice filled my head – the voice of Dagon himself, the Daedric Prince who nearly killed my ancestor. Dagon said that Silus had fulfilled his purpose and (insouciantly) asked that I kill him in exchange for sole possession of the dagger. A dilemma. Would I really kill Silus? Do I *need* the dagger? Can I justify 'doing Silus in', say, for the greater good – that is, using the dagger to save Skyrim (the needs of the many and all that ...)? Just how desirous am I of additional adventure? And which 'I' am I talking about here – my player-character or myself as gamer? Which ludic activity outweighs the other: roleplaying my character or playing the game? How can I make these activities seem *not* so mutually exclusive, thus extracting the most pleasure from the gaming experience? I mean, *my character wouldn't just kill Silus at the behest of some treacherous demon-god ... and yet ...* I want to see what happens if I do, and what lies behind that intriguing door of Dagon's

shrine which I'll doubtless have access to if I do as the Daedra bids (and likely not if I don't). Will my imagined consciousness enable my player-character to kill Silus, given that he is a descendant of a Mythic Dawn cultist, even if Silus himself has not shown any violent tendencies? Perhaps.

Upon arriving at the museum, I had overheard a partial argument between Silus and Madena (the Court Wizard). 'Your ancestors wouldn't want this, Silus,' she says. 'It's the past. Dead oaths on dead lips. Let it stay there.' She turns to my player-character, pleading, 'I beg you, don't go into Silus's museum', as the museum is Silus's 'way of trying to rebuild his family's pride: it's misguided' and, in no uncertain terms, 'That museum is a mistake.' She then walks off. If I inquire about the argument, Silus only responds, 'never mind that.' He is evasive, wanting to usher me into the museum to discuss the job of retrieving the fragments of Mehrunes' Razor – whose periodic appearance throughout history 'heralded bloody change and carnage,' Silus mentions. The quest may *already* be suspect. Oh, but what's the harm in following through ... at least until I know more?

I reflect, as gamer *and* player-character, upon the choice I've been presented with: Silus might be dangerous, might rekindle (not just remember) his family's cult. Showing me around the museum, I recall, he mentioned that the Order's 'importance to history cannot be forgotten'. *Perhaps*, I think, as history *does* tend to repeat itself (in Tamriel and on Earth). Silus gets rather excited about the prospect, though, exclaiming subsequently that the 'Mythic Dawn's importance – our importance – to history cannot be denied. I'll see that everyone in Tamriel remember that for a moment, we held the fate of the world in our hands, for good or ill.' And I consider that 'remembering history' differs from 'seeing that everyone remembers it'. Troubling. Silus even seems prideful as he reports, 'one of my forefathers was even chosen to assassinate Uriel Septim himself.' Perhaps Silus is a bit off his rocker. He finishes, remarking, 'We hid from our past for years, became tradesmen, people of coin and influence.' Ah. So the implication is that Silus's family still thrives, in places of power? Dagon's request to kill Silus may seem, now, not *entirely* morally repugnant, I think from my player-character's perspective. Perhaps his museum, decorated with long, flowing, brilliant red banners, is not just a *Nie Wieder* monument, but a recruiting tool for a group that almost destroyed Tamriel.

And yet Silus has, to my knowledge, *done nothing wrong*. He has done precisely what he has said, thus far: shown me the museum, paid me for the retrieval of the razor pieces, escorted me to the Dagon's shrine. My player-character, in my mind's eye, comes from a line of heroes all of whom worked tirelessly for Tamriel and its inhabitants: in *Morrowind*, in *Oblivion*, and now in *Skyrim – The Elder Scrolls* games *III*, *IV*, and *V*, respectively. That's the player-character I'm roleplaying. Would *he* kill Silus? Dagon himself provides another justification: 'Take your rightful place as my champion or I will crush you,' he threatens. Not much of a choice there, so perhaps it's not *really* my fault if Silus happens to take one of my arrows in the chest? While I'm drawing my bow and positioning my arrow, Silus protests, seemingly reasonably. He offers an alternative: he will take the shards (not yet an operable dagger) and seal them in a case in the museum. I get the gold. He gets his collection. And 'nobody has to die'.

Well, shoot. (And I don't mean the arrow.) Now my player-character, hero of Skyrim, really has an ethical dilemma. But it's more than one present in the imagined consciousness of the player-character. It's a conflict that exists between the player-character and the gamer. To maintain character (in the sense of roleplaying that particular character *and* character consistency in terms of the game's narrative), Silus's offer should be accepted. However, to see what the Razor can do, to see what's in Dagon's shrine, to see *what happens next in the game*, the gamer in me wants to let that arrow fly. Iser's semantic gap might be filled with any one of a number of justifications that I consider for the imagined consciousness of my character: Silus is crazy and will reestablish the dangerous cult; Dagon offers no real choice; use of the Razor could be for the greater good. Aarseth's keyhole is clear: killing Silus will either put my character in a better strategic decision to complete the game or it will not (although let's face it, either choice would allow me to complete the game) ... the Razor will likely be handier than gold (which can be gotten elsewhere); there may be something in that shrine worth having (and it seems at this point entry can be gained only with the slaying of Silus). And Sicart reminds us that 'we need to understand the design of the game, but only if we acknowledge that a living, breathing player will engage with it in ways that make gameplay a *personal* affair' (Sicart 2011, emphasis original).

Perhaps we accept that we are subject to the gameworld and its inhabitants, that the circumstances in which our player-characters find themselves, however limited the solutions and paths might be, are part of the game. Perhaps we fill in vacancies with the imagined consciousness that we bring to our player-characters. Or we might follow another path, one that may ease the tension between player-character and gamer. In a sense, the Mehrunes' Razor scenario puts player-character morality against gamer desire: the desire to 'choose right' is arrayed against the desire for more story – not an objectionable conundrum.

Iser claims of literary texts that different readings elicit different responses, sometimes caused merely by 'the reader's own change of circumstances'; still, though, subsequent readings mean the reader is more familiar with the text, and

this additional information will affect and condition the meaning-projection, so that now the gaps between the different segments as well as the spectrum of their possible connections can be applied in a different, or perhaps more intensive, way. The increased information that now overshadows the text provides possibilities of combination which were obscured in the first reading. Familiar occurrences now tend to appear in a new light and seem to be at times corrected, at times enriched (Iser 1989: 10).

And while Iser acknowledges that it is the text that 'permits this variation', 'But for all that, nothing is formulated in the text itself; rather, the reader himself produces these innovative readings' (Iser 1989: 10). The adventure game *can* provide us something formulated in the text itself – as the player can save the game and then reload repeatedly, following different strands of dialogue and experimenting with various actions: knowledge of how the narrative *might* unfold and how the game *might* respond can enhance, or perhaps 'better solidify' the imagined consciousness. Incidentally, this practice also enhances the awareness of choice (we cannot do that in reality). In essence,

players have one ‘accepted’ or ‘main’ player-character and storyline, and many ‘tests’ (in the form of save games) in which they explored alternatives. This procedure helps to resolve potential conflict between gamer and player-character motivations: For novels, as Andrew Craig points out, ‘Resolution may always be disrupted by further questioning’ (Craig 2016). For a videogame, we can question as we would for a novel, but we can also explore alternative narrative paths already authored, perhaps choosing one that best-suits – or we think would best suit – our desired narrative outcome.

To illustrate with our example: If I spare Silus, I am attacked by Dagon’s minions; if I defeat them, I procure the key to the shrine. I also learn that Silus goes back to his museum, and indeed the fragments of Mehrunes’ Razor are in a display case – one with which gamers cannot interact (open). Silus mentions that ‘The museum is doing well’ and claims, at least, that he has not spoken about the incident to anyone. I have to ask myself what the implications are of the museum doing well, though. If I kill Silus, I also gain entrance to the shrine (but am still attacked by Dagon’s demons as a ‘final challenge’) *and* I am able to wield Dagon’s powerful weapon (and unlike the Ring of Power in another tale, it seems I can use *this* evil weapon for good); additionally, I am the proud new owner of Silus’s rare, magical robes. Following the save-and-reload procedure, my gamer self has the satisfaction of exploring all paths, fulfilling my desire for more gameplay; however, my player-character self can ultimately have it only one way (*the* saved game to which I will return during my next gaming session). While this could be viewed as a form of ‘cheating’, it may yet be that this additional knowledge – of how these decisions and actions play out in different combinations – enables me to remain loyal to my player-character, to justify his decisions, to maintain the coherence of the imagined consciousness I set up for him.

While the videogames I have addressed reinforce the importance of *choice* in narrative games, they simultaneously indicate that there is no real *control*. Gamers are often left to mentally justify their actions in accordance with their player-characters’ personae, but rather than representing some lack in the in-game experience, this is a powerful act that serves to smooth the narrative, to revise it, and to enrich it. The narrative justification that forms in my mind to alleviate the conflict between the choices made (for instance, choosing diplomatic solutions to problems) and the results obtained (for instance, the ultimate, brutal slaying of the humans in Tenpenny) helps maintain the fiction of a coherent world and coherent character, even while events unfold as they do, regardless of the choices made or players’ and player-characters’ good intentions. Even games’ presentation of an exceedingly complicated set of choices cannot belie the fact that there is no control – much like in real life. But in real life, there is vastly more freedom: Rules are easier to break in reality, harder in a videogame (bound as we are by programming parameters). Yet consequences are vastly increased in the real world. When we engage roleplaying videogames, we map our intellectual, psychological, emotional patterns on a character already limited – by the rules of the game, by the game’s predetermined pathways. Our enjoyment of roleplay is based, then, on the negotiation between the ‘I’ and the machine as the site of the player-character. It is through the creative efforts of the player that ‘writes’, but more accurately, I think, *revises*, the character which enables gamers to experience the pleasure immersive roleplaying offers, especially when gamers’ conceptions of their player-characters –

their virtual personae – conflict with the forced decisions, actions, and dialogues into which player-characters must enter. Ironically, the binding, the limiting of the player-characters – who they are, what they can do, how they can do it – is what frees the player’s imagination. Players are bound by the game to constantly recreate themselves by negotiating the various facets of this posthuman experience, an act of negotiation from which much gaming pleasure emerges.

Endnotes

1. Quotations from the *Fallout 4* and *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* official websites.
2. Such is the nature of videogame studies: early is *barely* twenty years ago – remember the term, ‘new media’ and the promises of ‘hypertext?’
3. NPC: Non-player character, those characters within videogames that are not controlled by actual human beings (as they may be in massively-multiplayer games), but are computer-scripted entities.
4. Real life also works like this. Even so, and despite (for whatever reason) videogames often being highly praised for ‘realism’ by gamers (and marketers), gamers criticise developers for the compromised agency of player-characters. (So ... realistic dragons = okay. Realistic limitations = not okay.)
5. Not all roleplaying games are alike – there are, of course, different kinds of roleplaying. In the *Fallout* or *Elder Scrolls* series, the player-character is ‘fully’ customisable; it is ‘you,’ and the games try to ‘generalize’ (inter)actions so that any combination of characteristics will work quite seamlessly in gameplay, and gameplay is specified only in certain aspects to your character choices. In the series *Mass Effect*, the player-character is Commander Shepard, but is largely *your* Commander Shepard (you determine class, sex, etc.), so while the protagonist is ‘you,’ it is a limited version of ‘you,’ and the games (often cleverly, occasionally awkwardly) cater character (inter)actions to your choices. In other series, for which *The Witcher* serves as a representative example, the gamer plays a pre-determined character; the protagonist is a witcher, Geralt, and you play him. The advantage is narrative cohesion, consistency, complexity of interaction; the disadvantage is that it is not as individual an experience (there is less invention the gamer can do).
6. Although falling outside of the purview of this essay, Iser comments that ‘The indeterminate sections, or gaps, of literary texts are in no way to be regarded as a defect; on the contrary they are a basic element for the aesthetic response’ (Iser 1989: 9). Iser’s and Aarseth’s analyses are not ‘criticisms’, but rather explorations into how texts work. For roleplaying videogame experience, one can see character contradiction as a valid criticism, especially given what game designers claim of their games and what gamers might (idealistically) expect; the technology available and the videogame market make this criticism understandable, even if it isn’t ‘fair’ (without full-blown artificial intelligence, how can a videogame be a ‘truly’ individualised experience for the millions of players choosing countless character configurations all for a single game?).

7. By 'finishing,' I mean 'stopped playing', like a novel that I stopped reading, but remains on my mind, and with the knowledge that I could return to it.
8. In multiplayer environments, such a character description has the potential for more impact, as it is what other players can read, contributing to the notion that the player-character, that representation (not the gamer), is the active, 'real' agent from the perspective of other players.
9. Perhaps you're thinking about random encounter scenarios. True, these might be 'unique' to each gameplay, but rarely do random events have much of an impact on the main storyline. What's more, such events – like a random waylaying by enemies, a random encounter with a wandering NPC – are part of every player's narrative ... they just appear at different times throughout gameplay.
10. Two games ago, in *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*.

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