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VIDEO GAME NARRATIVE AND CRITICISM

Playing the Story

Tamer Thabet





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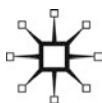
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▶ **Video Game Narrative
and Criticism:
Playing the Story**

Tamer Thabet

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To Ana Priscilla

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Introduction

Abstract: *A structural study of the video game narrative is overdue. Narration in games defies the conventional understanding of how stories are communicated because the story is told both by the player and the game system. In this introduction, we will present groundwork concepts such as the nature of play as an act of narration and the question of criticism.*

Keywords: criticism; fictional worlds; narrative; player-response

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Play as narration

Some would say this is a story about retribution, but for me it is about treachery and maybe patience. I wondered which quote would fit in a story about the time I had my nemesis, and it occurred to me how eloquently a fictional character such as Brick Top¹ would put it: “Do you know what ‘Nemesis’ means? A righteous infliction of retribution manifested by an appropriate agent; personified in this case by...me”. Now I cannot remember his name, but I spent quite some time trying to get him. My archenemy was invincible just because he could fly. He often ruined my plans, but this time things got a little too personal.

It was a regular counter-sniper mission. My team was tasked to clear some sniper nests across the river. Everything was going perfectly until he showed up flying over our camp and dropping his unlimited hand grenades on us. You do know that snipers are not supposed to fly and certainly could not carry an infinite number of grenades. No one else could fly, and so, we all had to abandon hide-outs and run. That morning, if you did not get blown up by one of his frags, his sniper buddies would pick you up from across the river at a hundred yards. All efforts to shoot him down were futile, even with a .50 caliber rifle. His taunting language was colorful as usual, and his favorite topics included nationalities, sexuality, and mother-related ideas. He finally challenged one of us to a knife fight. “Man to man”, he said. No one on my team wanted it for fear that he would have another trick to cheat. I volunteered, so he landed on the bridge. I ran toward him with my bowie knife at hand, and then I stopped leaving some 10 meters between us. I waited. He did not cheat this time, and he dashed at me with his knife. I dropped my knife, pulled my gun, and shot him till he fell dead on the bridge. I escaped back to the jungle before he respawned. Of course he was upset about my treachery and returned for his own vengeance, but this is what archenemies are for, right? This is one of the true stories that happen in fictional gaming worlds. With such impunity, millions of players traverse the fictional landscapes of video games every day in search of the experience of being someone else. What we call stories have turned into infinite opportunities for one to be transformed, immersed, and challenged, and they let one live larger-than-life experiences while impersonating fictional characters. One could have an antagonist or even be one.

We have read, watched, and listened to stories, but what does it mean to play them? Video games are the fictional worlds where players can virtually live stories and assume a role in their narration, which is a good reason for narrative and criticism theorists to engage with the emergent reality of playable fiction. Our knowledge of how to interpret game stories is underdeveloped. Surely, there is the need to develop a method for game criticism – maybe more than one method – but what would a vivid portrayal of the interpretive problem yield as long as the narrative structure in games remains ambiguous? To set the expectations about what follows, the first chapter explores the narrative structure in games to describe the player’s involvement in the storytelling, based on which, the second chapter builds an interpretive model for game criticism.

Our concurrence that “game stories are interactive” started to feel satisfactory, and this is my motivating problem because we cannot leave the study of game fiction there. The narrative in games is too curious and fascinating to be left labeled as merely “interactive”. When it comes to game fiction, the term “interactivity” is a terribly dull one and does not say anything about how to play a story and how a story affects us. “Interactive” conceals how gameplay reshapes the way we produce, perceive, and respond to fiction. The fear, rage, guilt, ecstasy, vengeance, goodwill, malice, and buffoonery that we personally deal with in game stories, in the midst of cliffhanging perils and dreads, must be more than interactions – at least for the student of narrative and criticism.

There is much more to game narratives than only interactions, and more should go into game criticism than only reviews. There are the unanswered questions about gameplay, impersonation, simultaneous narratives, and becoming protagonists in the fictional worlds. But most importantly, there is what the story can tell us about ourselves. This book is about the video game as a story world, the story as an experience, gameplay as narration, and the player’s narrative voice – that nonverbal discourse produced by the player in tandem with the game system. In the following exploration, the game is a story world, different from the imaginary ones that written text helps us visualize in our minds. These fictional worlds are navigable and smart because of the program code that governs their behavior and makes them respond to the player’s actions, which can turn the narrative into a personal experience; it is a player’s own story with a psychological dimension and a unique meaning-making process. These questions are the waypoints to suggest a critical model for video game fiction. I might have already burdened

you with three peculiar declarations: the game is a story world, the story is an experience, and gameplay is narration. But it all begins with two specific questions that sum up this work. How this story is told? And how should it be interpreted?

The very act of narration in games defies the conventional understanding of how stories are told because the player must participate in the narration and because the story is also told by the environment in response to the player's actions – all nonverbally. This means that the player assumes specific roles in the storytelling, and so, the various concepts of narration, characters, events, and time need reconsideration in the case of video games. A comprehensive treatment of games' narrative structures is overdue because games create such a radical transformation in the communicative and transactional activity familiar in the study criticism. From a structural perspective, I will treat games as spatial, audiovisual, and intelligently responsive story worlds in which the player assumes the roles of a co-narrator and protagonist. This will be clear when we draw an initial theoretical framework by referencing traditional and filmic narrative concepts. By now, the connoisseurs would have realized how heretical this inquiry might sound in some circles of game studies, but one may call it a book about narrative theory.

I will begin by expounding a few fundamental questions in narratology to shed some light on the narrative dynamics in video games. To some, the concepts I reference might sound outdated, but they can only be outdated as much as the periodic table can. To understand the narrative structure in games, someone for once must stop ignoring the fortune of structural knowledge – the fundamentals and comprehensible vocabulary – already anchored in the works of Chatman, Genette, Bal, Stanzel, Barthes, Jahn, and Herman and from film theorists such as Burgoyne, Metz, and Gaudreault. Nevertheless, because games force the player to be part of the telling in an intelligently responsive 3D world, the extant theories of narrative could get us only so far into comprehending storytelling in games, and thus, they will be only the starting point of visualizing their narrative workings. With this conventional frame of reference, I will gage the multiple roles of the player in the narrative against the role played by the game system, and there we will discover two conflicting narrators telling the same story: a human and a machine, with one defying the other's superior narrative authority to make a difference in *what* is told.

Answering how the game story is told promises more opportunities for critical reflection on game fiction and culture, and so, we should start thinking of gameplay as an act of narration. First, this would be in light of basic conceptualizations such as the figure of narrator, voice, perception, taxonomy, point of view, and narrative situation. While not readily compatible with games, literary and film groundwork theories can still tell us a lot about the constituting elements of the video game narrative. Needless to say, this goes counter to the many opinions that believe that narrative and interactivity inherently contradict one another.

Intuitively, the first thing that comes to mind is the player's centrality in the game story. Identifying the roles of the game player in storytelling will be a key to mapping the narrative because this is the fiction where the player gets pulled into the center of story world to tell by acting. Narratology tells us that the player simultaneously assumes three different yet interdependent roles the protagonist he or she impersonates, the narrator who unfolds the plot, and the audience. In other words, the player is central to both the telling and the reception.

This brings us to critical questions. What does the story mean and what does it tell us? How does it affect us and why it is significant? I find myself thinking in traditional critical ways. But again, this is a different story; it is a player's own experience. The proposition that will be made later is about an analytical model for game fiction. Inspired by the ideas of Norman Holland regarding the literary text as a private world, reader's identity, and self-discovery, this model is a way of reflecting on the game story, what it means to the player/critic, and how this meaning evolves during play and replays. This will be an exploration of how to account for meaning-making through the reproduction of gameplay experience as a *post factum* narrative, which is not a novelty; it is a common cultural practice that has not yet been called a genre, so what we will do later is accept such practice as an incubator for critical musing. If it wants to be based on the specific nature of game stories, our interpretive model must take into account the centrality of the player in game fiction and, therefore, must value the subjectivity of the analysis since the story mirrors the player who is much more immediately involved in the creation of meaning. By exploring the structural peculiarities of storytelling in video games,

the book develops a critical paradigm to explain the interrelationship of gameplay, fiction, and self-discovery.

Interplay: actions and responses

The various acts of reading, seeing, watching, listening, navigating, controlling, and effectuating are afforded in a fictional world programmed to make its visitor live and tell a personal story through gameplay. The notion of “world” in games is parallel to that of “text” in written fiction – that is, if we want to be inspired by reader-response theorists: Rosenblatt says that the text is the blueprint that guides our reading; Iser asserts the text is full of gaps that readers fill to create a story; and Holland stresses that readers turn the text into a private world where they deal with their fears and desires.² Why would not this apply to video games? Is it because the metaphors of blueprint and private world are no longer metaphors when it comes to video games?

Before diving into in the constructions and abstractions of structuralism, it would soften our landing to think about the readers’ relationship to fiction through reader-response notions. In the field of literary studies, the concept of interplay between the text and the reader has been lengthily argued. Reader-response theorists assert that readers actively create meaning through different reading-related processes such as retrospection and anticipation.³ Louise Rosenblatt maintains that the text itself acts as a *stimulus*⁴ that triggers the reader’s response and creativity, and that it has a constraining function as a blueprint that corrects and guides the reader. Writing about the similar concept of the text as a guide to the reader, Iser adds that “if communication between text and reader is to be successful, clearly the reader’s activity must also be controlled in some way by the text.”⁵ We also learn from this line of thought that while reading – and according to their accumulated knowledge, mood, culture, and various ideological and social orientations – readers fill textual gaps, interpret, judge, assume, and bring their own personal experiences into the text, which means that readers create the meaning of texts during their reading in a transactional practice. These ideas help us realize how readily video game fiction lends itself to reader-response criticism and how applicable reader-response ideas are to game narratives, especially in terms of the relationship between the player and the game world: the latter not only stimulates, guides, and constrains the

player but also challenges him or her to co-narrate and even to tell the story subversively.

Our real motive is to arrive at an interpretive model for game fiction, and this goal cannot be realized without understanding the narrative structure. A deeper insight into the mechanism of the game narrative shows that the telling and reception are synergic and interdependent as the player assumes the role of co-narrator while in the perceptual position of the protagonist. I will not hasten to say that gameplay changes everything we know about narratives, because it does not; it only makes narratives simultaneous and more complex. This should echo in criticism because unlike observing the protagonist in Ayn Rand's novel *Atlas Shrugged*, I am the protagonist in *BioShock*.⁶ The story is now about what I see and hear, what I do and feel, what I perceive and learn, and what it means to me – the player. This is just one type of critical treatment to deal with gameplay as a meaning-making process.

Critical theory examines the types of questions one asks about works of literature and representational arts, so the one question befitting games in this book is, “what do games tell us about ourselves?” For this reason the choice of critical reference would be Norman Holland's theory on response to fiction. Holland maintains that we actively transact literature so as to re-create our identities. During reading, he asserts, the readers turn the text into a private world to work out their fundamental psychological needs. Holland coins the term “identity theme” to describe the pattern of psychological conflicts, defense mechanisms, and coping strategies that readers are confronted with while responding to the text.⁷ Later on we will adapt Holland's concept to game fiction in order to come up with an interpretive model, and we will not embark on this task without applications. Our examples – such as *Penumbra Overture* and *BioShock* – illustrate that we can treat the game story as the player's own experience, where fears, desires, and anxieties are projected onto the fictional world.

Nevertheless, we should keep in mind that most of the reader-response notions address printed fiction and belong to a time before video games were introduced to the debate. The interrelationships between texts and readers that have been theorized about so far do not amount to more than mental processes;⁸ that is, the traditional reader-response interactions refer to emotional and psychological processes taking place in the mind of the reader. In video game fiction, by contrast, such reciprocity is not just metaphorical since the reader is replaced by a player who

responds to the game system, the authorial agency in charge of depicting and managing the fictional world, in a more material manner, and since the game world adapts itself to the new situation and responds back to the player. Simon Penny points to the general reciprocity of behaviors in games: the user's behavior occurs in response to the images while the images' behavior occurs in response to the user's.⁹ The player inputs actual information into the world – the setting, characters, and events – to which the latter in turn reacts. The response in this case is not only mental or emotional, but also actual and mutual: the transaction is real and not merely imagined, because characters react and events happen and change under the player's personal influence.

Games combine visuals, sounds, and printed text to create a containing milieu, and then they are governed by a program code to control their behavior, allowing the player to move through, interact with, and influence the happenings. In 3D game stories, play amounts to the act of telling because it refers to the coordinated acts of listening, watching, showing, sequencing, decision making, and controlling that make the player experience – not just perceive – the game story. But how do you experience anything? The dictionary's definition of "experience" is the "active involvement in an activity or exposure to events or people over a period of time that leads to an increase in knowledge or skill".¹⁰ For someone to experience, the mere use of senses to perceive events is not sufficient; they must partake by doing, acting, and deciding, which is the case during the immersion in a make-believe world.

Analysis of game narratives

In order to create an adaptable and extendible model for game criticism, we must explain the intricacies of the game storytelling and the forces of impersonation and defiance that shape the story. Manfred Jahn asserts that "the narratologist dissects the narrative phenomena into their component parts and then attempts to determine functions and relationships."¹¹ He defines narratology as the study to investigate and describe the structure of the narrative, which is our disciplinary strength in this book. Traditional literary narratology provides both the theoretical groundwork and the language that enable us to initiate our exploration. However, because the theories of literary narratology originally address the printed form of fiction, we need another theoretical layer to solidify

our examination of narration in games. Film narratology provides this theoretical enhancement due to the common audiovisual nature of games and film media, as well as the manner in which film narratology addresses the dualistic nature of narrative voice and nonverbal communication. Therefore, we will consult the concept of the cinematic narrator later on to help us think about narration in games. Moreover, it is useful to learn how film theorists have interpreted and employed the concept of narrator in film analysis, which was a task similar to our aim to understand narration in games. Since video games are closer to films than they are to written texts, the idea of a filmic narrator allows us to formulate the concept of the game's narrator(s) more easily.

Mainly because of game narratives' distinctive interactivity, they do not promptly subscribe to existing literary-analytical approaches. Narrative theory is simply not practiced in dealing with readers' being real partners in the storytelling. I have just said *readers* simply because narrative theory is not yet so ready for the term *players*. We know it's a story. But do we watch it, listen to it, or read it? Through play, a story is told as if to oneself, and while gameplay requires reading, hearing, seeing and acting, the player's interaction invalidates the terms "reader" and "viewer" in favor of the term "player". Nevertheless, narrative theory and its vocabulary should not be discredited in the study of video games. The kind of interaction in game narratives calls for the reconsideration of most of the fundamental concepts in literary theory, such as narration, voice, perception, time and space, and perhaps most importantly the idea of a "reader/audience/receiver" itself because the player – in certain ways – tells the story. This player assumes different roles in game narratives and is given a limited authority over the events by taking on a part in the narration and by projecting his or her own narrative voice, a voice that defies the other narrative voice produced by the game system. So far this is just talk. We need to find how it is possible to support the idea of a narrating and a discourse-producing player. Besides, another claim made here is about the player's role as a perceiving character in the story. *Focalizer* is now an archaic name for the perceiving character in the narrative, which we will use every now and then later in the book. The player impersonates the protagonist in the virtual space of the story and thus acts as the perceiving character while actively progressing and unfolding the plot.

Before we jump into the structural analysis of the game narrative, here is my short disclaimer: The games I speak of in these pages are narrative

based games only; other games such as sports and racing games fall outside of our scope. This work is also predominantly focused on first-person 3D games, and it only briefly discusses third-person games, so our attention is sufficiently focused to be able to offset the complexity, novelty, and abstraction of the subject, as well as to avoid the wool-gathering that would almost inevitably result from combining different genres in an unfamiliar medium with the many abstract concepts of narratology.

The two terms “story” and “narrative” are frequently used, and therefore, it is important to make the technical distinction between both terms early. The term “story” refers to a sequence of events involving characters, while the “narrative” is the way in which a story is rendered. The “narrative” is the concrete embodiment of the act of storytelling; it refers to the actual representation of an event or a series of events,¹² whereas the “story” is our more abstract reconstruction of events after they have been narrated. Now it is time to put narratology to test.

Notes

- 1 Brick Top is a British crime lord played by actor Alan Ford in the 2000 film *Snatch*
- 2 Rosenblatt, *The Reader, the Text, the Poem* (p.88), Iser, *The Act of Reading* (p.167), & Holland, *Dynamics of Literary Response* (p.30)
- 3 Iser, “The Reading Process”, p.64
- 4 Rosenblatt, *The Reader, the Text, the Poem*, p.11
- 5 Iser, *The Act of Reading*, p.167
- 6 The game is loosely based on *Atlas Shrugged*
- 7 Holland, “Unity”, p.125
- 8 Regan, p.139
- 9 p.83
- 10 Encarta Dictionary
- 11 Jahn, “Narratology”
- 12 Abbott p.193–195

1

A Player's Story

Abstract: *Through literary and cinematic perspectives, the application of narrative theory shows how the player of a game story co-narrates, becomes the perceiving character, and replaces the protagonist by means of play/performance. Gameplay is an act of narration fulfilled by the player and the system. On the one hand, the player's actions and responses create a form of subjective expression that substitutes the concept of voice in noninteractive genres. On the other, the player's control of the camera is a storytelling function in the filmic sense as it determines what is focused on and what is ignored. However, the player is not the only narrator; the game system also narrates by means of a more complex and authoritative narrating agency that challenges the player's own discourse.*

Keywords: film narratology; impersonation; narrative theory; player's narration

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Taxonomy

The first question we need to ask about game narratives concerns their standing among other narrative forms. We will start with an extensive quotation by Roland Barthes that offers a useful framework for pursuing this question:

There are countless forms of narrative in the world. First of all, there is a prodigious variety of genres, each of which branches out into a variety of media, as if all substances could be relied upon to accommodate man's stories. Among the vehicles of narrative are articulated language, whether oral or written, pictures, still or moving, gestures, and an ordered mixture of all those substances; narrative is present in myth, legend, fables, tales, short stories, epics, history, tragedy, drame [suspense drama], comedy, pantomime, paintings (in *Santa Ursula* by Carpaccio, for instance), stained-glass windows, movies, local news, [*sic*] conversation. Moreover, in this infinite variety of forms, it is present at all times, in all places, in all societies; indeed narrative starts with the very history of mankind; there is not, there has never been anywhere, any people without narrative; all classes, all human groups, have their stories, and very often those stories are enjoyed by men of different and even opposite cultural backgrounds. ("An Introduction", 237)

Manfred Jahn has organized the different genres, forms, and media referred to by Barthes in the following taxonomical diagram, encouraging his readers to add unaccounted-for genres to the tree structure: "If you come across a genre not accounted for by any prototype...radio plays? hypertext narratives? comic strips? ... try fitting it in".¹

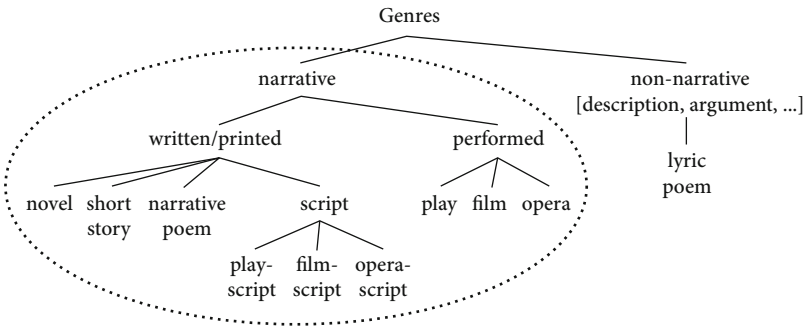


FIGURE 1.1 Manfred Jahn's tree of genres, <http://www.uni-koeln.de/~ameo2/pppn.htm>

In Jahn's tree structure above, video games would have to be located among the performed narratives: Genre > narrative > performed > video games. Game fiction belongs to performed narratives for two reasons: the performance involved in the storytelling and the substance of which game fiction is made.

Performance

Drawing on the studies by Huizinga, Laurel, Pearce, Whitlock, Newman, and Hand, we can claim that performance is an integral part of the storytelling in games, just as it is in film and theater, where the story cannot be told without the actors' performance.

In *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga identifies two overlapping functions of play: it functions both as contest and as representation.² The element of performance is especially emphasized in the functions of play since to him the aspect of "representation" always involves a display before an audience. Celia Pearce describes six "narrative operators" in video game narratives. The second narrative operator she identifies is that of the "performative": "The emergent narrative as seen by spectators watching and/or interpreting the game underway".³ She argues that the narrative in games is the product of play and that conflict in games produces a performative action. This holds true in almost any 3D first-person video game. For example, in *BioShock* we find that the player decides how the protagonist is presented: as the indifferent person who gets shortchanged and paralyzed by his/her lack of responsibility, as the altruist who experiences the world's plight with minimal strength and impact, or as a selfish figure who takes advantage of chaos with impunity. Both the concepts of performance and play imply taking a number of actions, and the difference between performance and play is that the first generally means a preplanned – and often rehearsed – series of acts according to a script, while the second means performing a number of acts according to a set of general rules.

Katie Whitlock argues that playing games is performance due to interactivity and that the narrative houses this performance,⁴ whereas James Newman in *Video games* underscores performance as an integral component in games' narrativity and maintains that a player's performance creates the plot and establishes the communication between the player and the system.⁵ Similarly, Richard Hand refers

to gameplay as performance, and he maintains that this performance is an important point of access to studying games from a dramatic perspective.⁶ Play is conceptually performative, and it is an obvious component of game fiction because the player is a performer in the story.

Substance

Another reason for placing video games among the performative genres is because of the substance of which they are made. Here it is useful to repeat a line from Barthes' citation: "as if all substances could be relied upon to accommodate man's stories". Barthes points to the potential that all substances can be used in storytelling. The video game as a vehicle of narrative is made of a mixture of written language, cinematic clips (cut-scenes), pictures, graphics, and the three filmic sound tracks (dialogue, music and effects). Films are generally created from an ordered mixture of text, pictures, and sounds, and the filmic components in video games bring them closest to the cinematic form. Based on their performative aspect and their substance, 3D games can be considered a performative narrative genre, and therefore, we can add them as a separate node on Jahn's generic map:

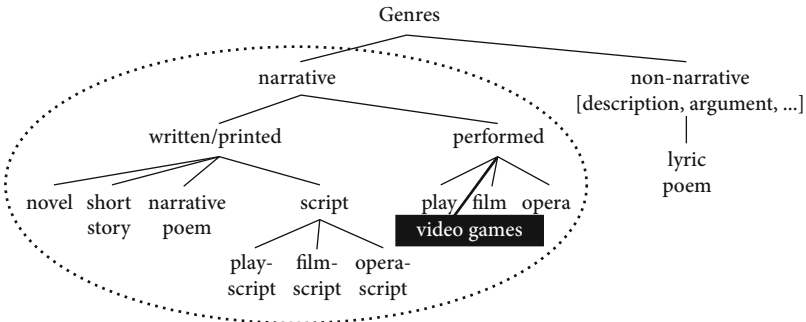


FIGURE 1.2 Adaptation of Manfred Jahn's tree of genres, <http://www.uni-koeln.de/~ameo2/pppn.htm>

Note: I added the video game node to illustrate video games' standing among other genres.

Source: This figure is Manfred Jahn's.

A place in the narrative

Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck explain the structuralist approach to narrative by adopting and systematizing Gérard Genette's method of dividing the narrative text into three different levels: *narrative*, *narration*, and *story*.⁷ First is the level of *narration* (*narration* in Genette's French original), which refers to the concrete way the story is told and the level on which the narrating agent is situated. Then Genette speaks of *narrative* level (*récit*), which is the level that contains the events and characters presented to the reader. The organization of narrative elements is central to this level in terms of chronology (temporal organization) and perspective (the character's perception). The final level is the *story* (*histoire*): On this level, the narrative elements are reduced to a chronological series. *Story* is an abstract construct not readily available to the reader. Regardless of the interactivity of the medium, video game narratives have the standard three levels of narrative, in which we will look for the player's influence as a narrating and perceiving agent – narrator and protagonist.

My alias was Philip when I traversed the horrible world of *Penumbra Overture*. Before I became Philip, the story began with the mourning of a passing mother. A few days after the funeral, a letter from a long-thought-dead father instructed Philip to destroy the contents of a bank deposit box: a book, some personal notes, and a map of northern Greenland. After Philip's loss of his single parent, the feeling of abandonment made him hold on to the idea that his father might still be alive. As a result, he did not comply with his father's instructions; he kept the contents of the box and traveled to Greenland in search of his father. After the briefing, I imagined I would start the game and become Philip. The proposed protagonist was supposed to find specific answers, which was my job as a player. In this story, there is a narrator and a protagonist, and I found myself taking over these roles.

In narrative theory, there is a general agreement that the narrator is a metaphorical agent that is often anthropomorphized. The narrator's voice is also metaphorical and imagined by the reader – with the help of textual markers – as if there is someone who actually recounts and comments on the events and characters. The narrator and the perceiving agent, the character whose perception presents the action, are treated separately by most narratologists since the narrator represents the text's

narrative voice or, in other words, answers the question “Who speaks?” in the text, while the perceiving agent (also called focalizer) is the character *who sees* (or, more generally, who experiences) in the text. Both the narrator and the focalizer have different sets of types and properties that can be determined by textual indications,⁸ and they belong to two different levels: the narrator plays a role on the level of narration, while the focalizer is to be found on the level of narrative. This is a depiction of the theoretical space where we need to locate the game player.

Hands off

What happens when you, the video game player, take your hands off the controller amid a play session? The answer depends on the specific game scene you imagine at this very moment. Is it an enemy charging at you? Or is it a scene where you stand still in a real-time environment? Before we get to these answers, let us review some relevant and fundamental aspects of the literary narrator and what it does.

It is said that “by definition narrative art requires a story and a storyteller.”⁹ Most narratologists argue that there must be a narrator, or a mediating agent, that projects a voice into the text: “Insofar as there is telling, there must be a teller, a narrating voice.”¹⁰ Whether it be Seymour Chatman, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, Gerald Prince, Lubomir Dolezel, Gérard Genette, Mieke Bal, Roland Barthes, Franz Stanzel, or Marie-Laure Ryan, each assigns an important number of the text’s functions to the narrating agent they call a narrator.

A narrator is the speaker or “voice” of the narrative discourse. . . . He or she is the agent who establishes communicative contact with an addressee (the “narratee”), who manages the exposition, who decides *what* is to be told, *how* it is to be told (especially, from what point of view, and in what sequence), and *what is to be left out*. (Jahn, “Narratology”, N3.1.1., emphases in original)

Chatman describes narratives as textual structures with a content plane (which he calls “story”) and an expression plane (called “discourse”). Discourse is *how* the content is presented, which is the narrator’s responsibility. In *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*, Chatman maintains that the narrator is the “teller”, the “transmitting source”,¹¹ which has the function to recount, record, and report.¹² Didier Coste describes the narrator as the “conveyor of narrative discourse”.¹³

Drawing on Dolezel, Genette, and Lintvelt, he defines the narrator's functions as representative, controlling, and interpretive.¹⁴ Like Coste, we will focus on the narration as an act of communication in general and on the narrator's act of communication as he or she communicates information through a language system (verbal, nonverbal, or both) that is dependent on the medium: for example, the real human voice in oral narrative, the posture in ballet, or the written language in novels.

Who's the narrator in video games? Who is the teller that communicates the discourse or, in my own words, progresses the narrative? What qualifies the game player to be a narrator? During the play session in *Penumbra Overture*, when I as the player take my hands off the controller for some time, the plot halts as a result of my inactivity. The depiction of the world, however, does not stop. I can still watch the dog behind the barred gate moving, and I can still hear the Morse code iteration continuing. Nevertheless, nothing substantial happens anymore. The story's content is not being presented and no such thing as a plot is being developed any further. The only *discourse* at this time is the game system's. In this case, an external viewer would only see a scene in which the camera is shooting from a stationary position. The camera that I, the player, control is not moving, and therefore, the viewer is disconnected from the general context; there is only a fixed frame that shows a dog moving back and forth behind a barred gate with a radio continually sounding Morse code in the background. If the player does nothing, no other agent takes over the narration. By means of visual rendering, the system will continue to tell its sterile part waiting for the player to trigger an event to which it can react. The system will not report an event until the player makes it happen; that is, the player is responsible for getting the protagonist to open the barred gate in the absence of any other options. Similarly, and for the same reason (the lack of alternatives), it is the player who must get the protagonist to decode the radio message (solve the riddle). To be blunt, when I as the player am inactive, the narrator is mute and the story is not actively told. But I, the player, do not control the dog and its actions. Many other environmental events in the story are also out of my control: I do not control the depiction of the place or the responses of the other characters. The story scene is presented by both the player and the system. This is just a clue, and therefore, it is also important to explain how the player's performance projects his or her own narrative voice (metaphorically). To that end, we must understand how a narratologist can detect the presence of a narrator in a text.

What is a narrator?

According to Jahn, the narrator is “temporally, spatially, and *ontologically* distant from us...invented, imaginary, not real”.¹⁵ Chatman defines the narrator as a teller whose presence is *presumed* by the audience.¹⁶ Coste also explains that the narrator’s presence is imaginary but adds that it is vital for narrative communication:

The critic-as-reader expresses his desire of being “talked to,” his need for a special addresser somewhere, which is a vital part of literary communication, not the fact of a human presence here, which remains always phantasmatic at this end of the act of communication. Therefore we shall call voice the product of the reader’s quest for the origin of the text. “A voice”: such is the vague, empty answer that we must give to the question of “who speaks”... The narrator is said to be an abstraction, but he has a function, or better a “mission” or task; our theorists speak of “him” as if he were a human being or perhaps a spirit, without a personality, but still capable of good and ill will, success and failure, authority and interpretation. (Coste, 164–166)

Herman and Vervaeck explain the inevitable inclination to anthropomorphize the narrator as follows:

One cannot deny that here again structuralism catches a textual aspect in all too human terms. Most narratologists use the term *narrator*, and we will do so too since the use of less anthropomorphic terms such as *narrating instance* does not prevent this instance from being characterized by means of such anthropomorphic criteria as “reliability” and “detachment”. (81, emphases in original)

Chatman emphasizes the presence of the abstract figure of the narrator based on the vitality of its function – the telling – but he does not insist on the narrator’s humanness, especially in film: “As Sarah Kozloff puts it, simply but incisively, ‘Because narrative films are narrative, someone must be narrating.’... Or if not necessarily someone, at least something”.¹⁷ We may conclude from such discussions that the narrator is a kind of agency implied by the communicative nature of the text and an anthropomorphized figure that exists only because of its narrative function.

This was our starting point. The narrator is an abstraction, a method by which the story is told. This method is anthropomorphized. We can detect the presence of a narrator through the mood, both cultural

and social orientations, beliefs, values, political biases, and so on, plus through the fact that this “human” voice in our heads directs its speech to us personally. Now, if we wish to claim that the video game player narrates, first we must ask how we detect a narrator anyway.

Detection

Manfred Jahn introduces three different ways that help us form an idea about the narrator. In the course of an analysis of J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, he points out three identifiable *voice markers* in the text – in other words, the textual elements that project a narrative voice. First is the *content matter*: “there are naturally and culturally appropriate voices for sad and happy, comic and tragic subjects.” For example, Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye* often exaggerates when he speaks, which pushes against the limits of natural or cultural appropriateness, thereby putting them on display. Jahn calls the second type of voice marker the *subjective expressions* “that indicate the narrator's education, his/her beliefs, convictions, interests, values, political and ideological orientation, attitude toward people, events, and things. In Salinger's text, we do not only get an idea about the narrator's age and background, his discourse is full of value judgments, terms of endearment, disparagement, and expletives”.¹⁸ The third type is *pragmatic signals*: “expressions that signal the narrator's awareness of an audience and the degree of his/her orientation towards it”.¹⁹ Here we should pay attention to Jahn's *subjective expression*. It is the indication of narrator's personality.

Sometimes it is difficult to detect such voice markers in a text when the narrator does not refer to himself/herself and refrains from providing any coloring to his/her discourse. One of the narrator's properties as it has come to be explored by narrative theory is related to his/her visibility; the narrator can be either an overt or a covert narrator. The latter type of narrative agent does not refer to himself or herself in the text and does not address anyone, such that this narrator does not leave traces of his/her presence and thus is not signaled in the text through voice markers. This property makes the narrator even more abstract, to the point where even his or her gender becomes indeterminable. Many narrative theorists feel compelled to anthropomorphize the narrator in

order to counter such abstraction. An exception is Mieke Bal, who has on occasion chosen to refer to the narrator as “it”:

When...I discuss the narrative agent or narrator, I mean the linguistic subject, a function and not a person, which expresses itself in the language that constitutes the text....I shall here and there refer to the narrator as “it,” however odd this may seem. (Bal, 16)

Here is the main difference between games stories and the ones we read. The narration in games relies on a real human being and not an anthropomorphized textual entity. Hoffman and Murphy’s citation below typically sounds like a narratologist talking about narrators who live in written texts.

It is important to remember that both concepts [i.e., point of view and narrative voice] are metaphoric, that the figure of point of view has to do with how the action is seen or experienced and that the figurative narrative voice is really silent and requires us to suppose from the words on the page how that voice might sound if someone were actually speaking them. (Hoffman and Murphy, 7)

Now, we all know that you, the video game player, are not a metaphor, but we have not yet established what qualifies you to be a narrator. What is it that you do in the game to create discourse?

The player’s expression

In order to establish that the player narrates and can be considered a narrator, we have to ask the following questions: Since it is the narrator’s function to express and be responsible for *how* the content is presented, is the player likewise responsible for *how* the content is presented? Does the player express anything? The answer is yes, the player is responsible for how events are presented. The player is responsible not only for triggering events (e.g. doing “something” or entering a place in order to provoke a system’s response) but also for the expression of events and their presentation. The player has two means of narration at his or her disposal: control and performance.

“Control” in literary narratology refers to one of the narrator’s functions: “fonction de contrôl ou fonction de régie”.²⁰ Lintvelt points out that the control function is essential for the narrator since he or she controls

the structure of the text by reporting the discourse of the actors. In video games, however, it is the player who controls the protagonist's actions and decisions (within the options allowed for by the game system). Thus, the player produces the discourse by means of his or her *subjective expression*: when reading a novel, we piece together the narrator's image by assembling textual clues such as the narrator's subjective expression that indicates his or her education, beliefs, values, political and ideological orientations, attitudes, and other characteristics that are already embedded in the text. But in video games, instead of an already formulated textual narrator, the player projects his or her own narrative voice through his or her own expression, which leaves a personal mark. Play represents a series of acts by the player: moving, effectuating, interacting, choosing the sequence, and deciding on the character's presentation, all of which are controlled by the player.

Storytelling games gravitate toward the category of performative narratives because of the player's actions and their quasi-filmic nature. If we look at the performative actions of the player as related to the control function, we find that the player chooses from a wide variety of actions representing choices that influence the outcome. Often the player can do similar actions in different and meaningful ways, each of which affects the context differently. A good example is *BioShock*, a first-person game that created a controversy by offering the player the choice either to save or kill an orphan child. The game presents the story of a city plagued by a vicious circle of greed and insanity in which the player is presented with three different choices regarding a wandering orphan: to ignore the whole situation and move on, to save the orphan, or to kill the orphan.

The first choice results in the player's inability to traverse the game's world and escape the city; the player needs to extract a mutagen (chemical agent that modifies the genetic substance of the player's character) from the orphan, and failing to collect that mutagen will result in the player's physical weakness and inability to survive the dangerous environment. The second choice is to save the orphan by extracting the right amount of the mutagen, which will improve the player's chance to survive the dystopia. The third choice is to extract twice as much mutagen, which will kill the orphan but which also results in a great improvement of the player's abilities and thus the player ensures his or her supremacy in the city.

Nonverbal expression

The player's expression (i.e. his or her narrative voice) in the fictional world of video games is nonverbal, which should not be considered an anomaly, since nonverbal narrative communication is customary in many storytelling forms, including film. Earlier, our adaptation of Jahn's generic map resulted in placing video games among the performative narrative genres mainly because of the performative nature of play. Literary and film theorists recognize that the narrative voice can manifest through nonverbal means. For instance, Chatman writes:

Every narrative... is a structure with a content plane (called "story") and an expression plane (called "discourse").... The expression plane is the set of narrative statements, where "statement" is the basic component of the form of the expression, independent of and more abstract than any particular manifestation – that is, the expression's substance, which varies from art to art. A certain posture in the ballet, a series of film shots, a whole paragraph in a novel, or only a single word – any of these might manifest a single narrative statement.... [Voice] refers to the speech or *other overt means through which events and existents are communicated to the audience.* (*Story*, 146, 153, my emphasis)

Chatman stresses that we need to consider the acts of speech and thought in general as a subclass of acts in order to understand the concept of the narrator's voice.²¹ Thus, in games, just as in other nonverbal forms of fiction, there is a language system that underlies the player's narrative voice, and in the case of games, when it comes to the player's – not the system's – narration, the voice metaphorically refers to the means by which the player creates the discourse. In the early 1970s, film theorists began to work on translating and applying narratological concepts to films, resulting in the understanding that the filmic form has its own language, a language of visual and audio codes different from, but related to, the language of the printed form. Christian Metz maintains that "these 'languages' are not all found on the same plane with respect to cinema: Speech, noise, and music were annexed at a later time, but film was born with *image discourse*".²² The following excerpt from Metz's book helps us realize that the video game can be understood as a communication system that produces a specific discourse that is as structurally complex as the medium that produced it:

Certain systems (even the least human ones) are called "languages" if their formal structure resembles that of our spoken languages: This is the case with

the language of chess (which de Saussure found so interesting) or with the binary languages of computers. At the other pole, everything that expresses man to himself (even in the least organized and least linguistic way) is felt to be a “language”. (*Film Language*, 65)

In the context of game fiction, Metz’s description of the system’s “language” should remind us of Brenda Laurel’s theory that during the communication between people and computers, the words can be replaced by graphic signs, nonverbal sounds, or animation sequences.²³

Since a discourse, in the wider application of the concept, may also be created nonverbally, narration through play is a valuable conceptual tool for understanding the player’s role in the fictional world of a game’s story. However, this concept remains underdeveloped when we include only literary narratology (narratological concepts related to printed forms of fiction) in the analysis because this type of narratology alone does not provide sufficient theoretical grounds for conceptualizing the player’s narrative function in game stories. Literary narratology does not get us far enough in comprehending a player’s position in a complex medium composed of a variety of substances and controlled by a computer program that simulates a world with artificial intelligence. Hence, in order to form a better idea about narration in games, it is vital for the current investigation to relate to the transition of narratological conventions from literary narratology to film narratology and how narrative theories have been applied to the cinematic form.

The cinematic narrator

As a dynamic process, narration deploys the materials and procedures of each medium for its ends. (Bordwell, 183)

In early studies of film narratology, film narration refers to two types: the voice-over narration and the filmic agency responsible for the film’s discourse. The presence of a cinematic narrator – as an agency – is a must, even if such a narrator cannot usually be referred to as a single intentional agent in the way we are used to in written fiction. In this context, Metz writes:

The impression that *someone is speaking* is bound not to the empirical presence of a definite, known, or knowable speaker but to the listener’s spontaneous perception of the linguistic nature of the object to which he is

listening; because it is speech, someone must be speaking...some “grand image-maker” (*grand imagier*) who...is first and foremost the film itself as a linguistic object...situated somewhere behind the film, and representing the basis that makes the film possible. (*Film Language*, 20–21)

Along the same lines, Burgoyne also writes:

Narration refers to the techniques, strategies and signals by which the presence of a narrator can be inferred, which in literature takes the form of certain pronouns and verb tenses. In film, however, the category of *narration* is associated with both voice-over or character-narration, and with the more elusive concept of general cinematic narration involving all of the codes of the cinema. (96, my emphasis)

Different film narratologists use different terms for the filmic narrator: Metz refers to it as the *grand imagier*;²⁴ Sarah Kozloff uses the term *image-maker*;²⁵ David Black calls it the *intrinsic narrator*;²⁶ and André Gaudreault calls it the *fundamental narrator*.²⁷ Chatman just calls it *the cinematic narrator*. Like others, he insists that the cinematic narrator’s voice should not be confused with the voice-over narration (the speaking character) in films. Chatman asserts that the cinematic narrator is not a human being but rather the overall agent responsible for the showing. This cinematic narrator should not be confused with the voice-over narrator. This narrator is the composite of a complex variety of communication devices on auditory and visual channels: for example, noise, voice, music, image (of actors, locations, or props), and cinematography (lighting color and camera [distance, angle, and movement]). From these communication devices, the cinematic narrator is synthesized by the viewer through a semiotic process.²⁸ From that, we could infer that there is a telling authority in film, a decision-making agency responsible for the showing.

The player’s narration

Decision-making is not the only factor that qualifies a player to be a discourse producing narrator; also through controlling the camera, the time, and the sequence, the player qualifies as a discourse producing narrator because he or she is able to organize, arrange, select, and give efficient, sufficient, and relevant information. First, the player projects his or her narrative voice through the voice marker that Jahn refers to

as the *subjective expression*: actions that indicate the narrator's education, political and ideological orientations, beliefs, convictions, interests, values, and attitudes toward people, events, and things. For example, in *Penumbra Overture*, whether or not Philip (the main character) faces his fears, and whether or not he takes a confrontational approach, is wholly up to the player. In that sense, the player decides whether to narrate a story about a victim or a story about a person who resists. This concept can be further clarified through game examples such as *BioShock*, *Max Payne*, and *Iron Storm*. The overall agency of the game, or the game system, may leave additional information for the player to present. If ignored, this additional information does not affect the progress of the plot, but if presented, it will add a certain depth and a significant influence on the meaning of the narrative. It is the player's decision to include or ignore either some or all of this additional information.

In *BioShock*, the player moves through a fallen city called Rapture and learns what is necessary to know so as to act with and on the unfolding plot. The game world provides the necessary information in different ways (e.g. through the world's depiction, cut-scenes and/or other characters' dialogues during the play sessions). On the other hand, the player acts on other information that adds depth to the story and thereby influences it. If the player chooses to ignore the task of finding and releasing this additional information, the outcome will differ, and it will affect the characterization. The additional information is scattered throughout the city in the form of posters, writings on walls, and recorded voice diaries of other characters, which the player can search for, collect, and listen to. The player has no control over the incoming radio communications received from other (nonplayable) characters, because these messages – unlike the diaries – are controlled by the game system and are not optional. One character, a lady by the name of Tenenbaum, helps the player throughout the game and urges him or her to save the stray orphans. She is very grateful to the player every time he or she saves an orphan. Tenenbaum communicates with the player, who gradually comes to understand that she is very attached to the orphans.

If the player relies only on the radio messages, he or she will learn later from another character that Tenenbaum was one of those responsible for the atrocities that took place in the orphanage years ago: she was part of the team that conducted medical experiments on the orphans – out of commercial interests. In this case, the news comes after a relatively long cooperation between the player and Tenenbaum, and so, it represents

a shocking disclosure to the player, who will begin to distrust her and reevaluate her intentions. The other scenario occurs when the player chooses to listen to two of Tenenbaum's voice diaries earlier in the game. In the first, she confesses her role in the orphanage, and in the second, she expresses her regret, which explains why she cares about the orphans at an early stage of the plot before Frank Fontaine (another character) reveals to the player Tenenbaum's previous involvement in the evil, which he does in an attempt to dissuade the player from an alliance with Tenenbaum. The timing of releasing this information (Tenenbaum's remorse) is critical to the way in which the content of the story is presented. And the chronology of the information release is ultimately in the hands of the player.

André Gaudreault's approach to the cinematic narrator is based on the merging of two modes of communication in film: *monstration* through the camera and *narration* through editing. According to Gaudreault, on the mimetic level, monstration is the narrative act of presenting events in the present time, where the monstrator uses the camera to show events mimetically as they take place, whereas on the second level and according to the cinematic narrator's point of view, which Gaudreault ascribes to editing, the cinematic narrator creates a more complex temporality; that is, editing allows the cinematic narrator to create a narrative past within the mimetic present, shown by the camera.²⁹

If the player of *BioShock* decides to linger and take the time to examine the commercials, the posters, the artwork, and other installations in Rapture, it will become clear how grotesque and corrupt the city's value system had become before its demise. The player's control of the camera (which also represents both the protagonist's point of view and movement) means that the player selects, deselects, and arranges information. This is not only a "monstration" or showing ability but also an act of editing similar to the filmic editing in concept.

Another example comes from both *Max Payne* and *Iron Storm*, where the player can optionally spend a long time watching in-game TV during the play sessions. The TV sets are scattered in the game's world, and the type of content provided in the TV programs is relevant to the story as it provides both commentary on the events and background for the current situation from a different perspective. In *Max Payne*, examining the billboards or the wall graffiti reveals additional commentary on the *film noir* ambiance of the story and often creates the discourse element that Jahn describes as "content matter", which is the kind of voice marker

by which the narrator's presence can be detected (i.e. the cynic, comic, or melodramatic feel that characterizes the story).

The game world's narration

There is a narrator who depicts the story's world, the space, the time, and the characters, and it is certainly not the player who portrays that part. In Burgoyne's, Jahn's, and Kozloff's words, film narration is an agency, and we find a similar agency in video game fiction. Jahn coins the term "filmic composition device (FCD)"³⁰ to describe the showing agency or what was described by other theorists as a cinematic narrator. He defines the FCD as

[t]he theoretical agency behind a film's organization and arrangement, assumed to be guided by maxims of giving efficient, sufficient, and relevant information. The FCD selects what it needs from various sources of information and arranges, edits, and *composes* this information for telling a filmic narrative. A film shows us what the FCD has arranged for us to see. ("Film" F4.1.2)

I will briefly borrow Jahn's term in order to name the game's narration agency the game composition device (GCD). The GCD is the overall agency that creates and manages the fictional world. The program code of the game maintains the setup of the representational visual and audio objects as well as the interactive objects in the game world. It might be a bad idea to come up with this clunky term, GCD, but we will not have to carry it for a long time. I am not fond of term coinage, but it is a necessary evil that will help us push the idea further. GCD would refer to the game world as narrator, and I promise to drop it as soon as possible.

Following Jahn's definition of such agency in film, we find that the GCD is theoretically identical to the FCD, with one significant difference that grants video games their uniqueness: the narrating device in games (GCD) allows the player to co-narrate by handing over part of the narrative agency to the player. The player's agency includes the aspects highlighted in Jahn's definition of the FCD: the player controls the protagonist's actions and choices and so is able to organize, arrange, select, and give efficient, sufficient, and relevant information; moreover, the player controls the camera.

Robert Burgoyne draws on the theories of Seymour Chatman, David Black, Christian Metz, André Gaudreault, Sarah Kozloff, Francesco Casetti, Raymond Bellour, Tom Gunning, and Gérard Genette to conclude that “the general argument favoring a narrator in film is congruent with the view of many theorists of literature who believe the concept of the narrator is logically necessary of [*sic*] all fiction”.³¹ He defines narration in film as “the discursive activity responsible for presenting or recounting the events or situations of the story” and identifies two kinds of narrators who operate in the “film-text”. The first is the personified character-narrator, whose voice is manifest as a voice-over, a character’s voice. However, it is more important for us to note that Burgoyne describes the function of the second type of cinematic narrator as “the overall control of the visual and sonic registers”. He describes this second type of filmic narrator as an impersonal extradiegetic narrator, who “manifests itself not through verbal discourse but through a range of cinematic codes and channels of expression”. This impersonal narrator is responsible for the “larger narration produced by the ensemble of cinematic codes, the overarching discourse”. It is the narrator “who renders the text in non-verbal form”.³² This narrator’s nonverbal voice arises through cross-cutting, rhyming images, superimposition, manipulation of point of view, and expressive interpolations. Although these are the only examples of cinematic presentation techniques Burgoyne himself presents as the nonverbal equivalent of the narrator’s enunciation in a novel, there are obviously still other techniques of presentation in film, such as the size of the shot (close-up shot, medium shot, long shot), the camera angles, the camera movements, the editing, the sound, and so on. Burgoyne describes his second type of narration as the primary source of narration. In the case of video games, this narrator is the game system, or the GCD.

Burgoyne stresses that “material such as the actor’s appearance, the location or setting, the *mise-en-scène*” needs to be perceived as the fictional world itself – that is, to distinguish the fictional world itself from the narrator’s discourse as “the type of expressive interpolations which might be analogized with Genette’s narrative voice”.³³ Otherwise we cannot distinguish between the narrator’s statements and the facts of the real world of the fictional universe.³⁴ Here in video games, this last statement by Burgoyne can be a perfect template to understand the duality of narration in games. The narrator’s statements are represented by the player’s play while the facts of the fictional universe are what the GCD creates; the game’s world and rules.

Drawing on Marie-Laure Ryan's model of impersonal narration in literary narratology, Burgoyne adapts this model for film: the impersonal narration creates the world and then presents it as autonomous and as if it pre-existed the narrator's discourse, while the personal narration (of the character-narrator) reports and evaluates this world as witness or participant. In Burgoyne's view, this concept allows the narrator to be conceived as the source that both creates and reflects the fictional world, thereby producing a type of discourse interpreted by the audience as the facts of the real world of the fictional universe. As a result, we are able to distinguish between "the mimetic stratum of the film-text and the shaping activity of the narrator".³⁵ This approach is useful in the sense that it provides a theoretical groundwork for the concept of game narration: the shaping activity of player-as-narrator and the world-creating discourse of the GCD.

The conflict of narration

The narrator is viewed singly in principle, even though "he" may end up subdivided or multiplied. (Coste, 166)

The GCD is the fictional-world-creating agency that controls what the player does not: other existents (characters and settings), events (actions and happenings), and the rules of presentation. There is never a single voice and a single narrator in games, but rather two conflicting narrative voices, both narrating simultaneously. Although the player's agency is inarguably more limited than that of the GCD, it is enough to allow him or her to tell, to present content, and to select and deselect the information to be presented. The player presents this information by evaluating, making decisions, and taking actions, all of which create a player's own subjective expression that shapes the discourse. Both the GCD and the player formulate and shape the discourse: the GCD by presenting the world, its existents, events, and rules; and the player by assuming essential narrator functions granted by the GCD.

The GCD creates the mimetic stratum, but it cannot be described simply as mimetic. It also functions as a diegetic device in various ways: it is able to stop events and run filmic scenes that show events in the past (thus performing a kind of diegetic summary); it is able to project narrative voice-overs or commentary in printed text, and in many instances, it can control the camera and the player's actions. In *BioShock*, for instance, the player – suddenly – injects him or herself with a drug; this action is seen through the

player's eyes (the eye-mounted camera) but it is not a voluntary action by the player, even if it is presented as if the player (i.e. the protagonist) did it willingly and out of necessity. Another example is to be found in *Penumbra Overture* where, at a certain point, the player looks behind unwillingly and then loses control of the protagonist's role to the GCD: it is not uncommon in games to be confronted with moments when the player's agency is subordinated to the GCD's. This aspect of the relationship between the GCD's narration and the player's narration upholds the order in the world of play and ensures that the player's input does not jeopardize the integrity of the fictional realm. Herman and Vervaeck describe the ramifications of the presence of more than one voice in a novel for the reader:

Following Bakhtin, [James Phelan] does not consider a narrative text as a single-voice monologue that supposedly addresses the reader in a compelling manner but rather as an exchange of voices in which the reader has an active role in weighting one voice against another. When reading a story, a reader hears the voices of all kinds of narrative agents – both inside and outside the story – and tries to distill from this polyphony one harmonious whole. This is precisely the way in which the reader gets actively involved in the story. In this active process, ethical values are shaped. Because of the polyphony, these values often remain ambiguous and go against a simple division in good and evil. (123)

The video game player gets involved by projecting his or her own narrative voice to challenge the authorial voice of the game's world. Challenge is the predominant characteristic to describe the relationship between both narrating agents in games: simultaneously, while the GCD tells the story of a constantly imperiled character, the player's telling conveys that the same character is resisting the adversities created by the GCD. So this is a situation where I co-narrate the game story I am playing, and without my part of the narration, the protagonist is assumed to be simply the subject of the menaces and puzzlement of the world created by the authorial game system.

The self and the simultaneous narration: living and telling

As we get closer to exploring game criticism and the meaning-making in games, it is a proper time to start talking about me because I am not only a co-narrator; I am also the protagonist in this story. In *A Theory of Narrative*, Franz Stanzel distinguishes between three narrative situations,

although he calls them no more than “rough descriptions of basic possibilities of rendering the mediacy of narration”:³⁶

It is characteristic of the *first-person narrative situation* that the mediacy of narration belongs totally to the fictional realm of characters of the novel: the mediator, that is, the first-person narrator, is a character of this world just as the other characters are. The world of the character is completely identical to the world of the narrator. . . . It is characteristic of the *authorial narrative situation* that the narrator is outside the world of the characters. The narrator's world exists on a different level of being from that of the characters. Here the process of transmission originates from an external perspective. . . . [I]n the *figural narrative situation*, the mediating narrator is replaced by a reflector: a character in the novel who thinks, feels and perceives, but does not speak to the reader like a narrator. The reader looks at the other characters in the narrative through the eyes of this reflector-character. (4–5)

Before we go any further, a “reflector” is just another name for “focalizer”, which used to be the technical term for the perceiving character. Whereas the language Stanzel uses to define the three situations may sound promising and relevant to our exploration of game narratives, the theoretical structure itself is not flexible enough for us to apply it to game fiction, because it claims three different situations and does not discuss a possibility of overlap or exchange. After all, Stanzel is only referring to the printed form of fiction. His goal in developing his typology of the three narrative situations is to examine typical narrative patterns that result from different combinations of narrative features, such as involvement, distance, knowledge, reliability, voice, and mood (Genette's term for focalization). His work on the first-person narrative situation nevertheless provides us with an interesting opportunity to further identify a narrative situation specific to game narratives in terms of mediacy and temporality.

Stanzel distinguishes between the narrating “I” and the experiencing “I” in first-person narration.³⁷ In this situation, the narrating “I” knows more than the experiencing “I” and is usually older and wiser. Herman and Vervaeck provide an example in their analysis of “The Map”, a short story by Dutch writer Gerrit Krol: the narrating “I” is more mature but is no longer fascinated by maps, unlike the boy who is enthralled by just seeing the name of his village on a map. Herman and Vervaeck's analysis illustrates that the narrating “I” has lost his ability for “childlike enchantment”. Such realization is possible when the reader recognizes the difference between the boy and the narrator. This analysis is similar to Stanzel's analysis of Thomas Mann's *Confessions of Felix Krull, Confidence Man: The Early Years*: there he talks of

“the tension between the older, matured and more sensible ‘I’ as narrator and the ‘I’ as hero, still completely engrossed in his existential situation”.³⁸

This literary situation makes us realize that the same possibility is not available in game fiction as far as mediacy and temporality are concerned, because when the player narrates, he or she does not tell the story of a past personal experience but a story as it happens, and therefore, the player’s narrating and experiencing selves merge. The player experiences as he or she narrates, and the temporal or diachronic demarcation of narrating and experiencing selves cannot be assumed, because character development is synchronized with and dependent on the player’s progress; that is, the player who is impersonating the protagonist cannot be in a position where the narrating and experiencing selves are two different roles, because – unlike what is the case with a traditional first-person narrator – the player has not grown wiser before the storytelling began in order to accommodate telling the story in the past tense. Game fiction is a live experience, which implies that this type of narrative is told in the present tense. To be sure, such a claim may seem to contradict many obvious examples in game fiction where we find the narrating and experiencing “I” situation that Stanzel describes. Thus, for example, *Penumbra Overture* takes the shape of an epistolary narrative and begins with a letter from Philip, the protagonist, before the player impersonates him. Philip reflects on the sequence of events that has just come to an end and provides information to which the player has had no previous access. This realization brings us to the most elusive narratological aspect in game fiction: in-game and out-of-game situations.

The following tables show that the narrating self, as distinct from the experiencing self, is generated by the GCD through an aesthetic technique, which injects a past-tense narrating voice (a letter from Philip) to develop the epistolary feel of the narrative:

TABLE 1.1 *Out-of-game self*

Out-of-game	
Narrator	CGD
Manifestation ³⁹	Filmic Sequence
Situation	The GCD presents Philip’s (the I-narrator’s) own voice: the player first listens to Philip’s telling how it all started and then watches a message being typed on the screen. This message represents the narrating “I” of Philip, who says how he got to his present situation. The player here does not narrate, and therefore, Stanzel’s double-self situation is fabricated by the GCD to prepare the player for the play session and provide a back story.

TABLE 1.2 *In-game self*

In-game	
Narrator	Player & CGD
Manifestation	Play session
Situation	The player pretends to be Philip. The player narrates as himself/herself and as Philip's experiencing self, but cannot be Philip's narrating self (the one who has witnessed everything in the past) – hence the inapplicability of Stanzel's two selves as far as the player is concerned. While the player re-enacts Philip's story, and impersonates Philip in the play sessions, the GCD feigns Philip's voice to guide the player.

Games make use of the kind of interpolated narration that Herman and Vervaeck describe as follows:

For instance, in a novel action can be alternated with a letter that provides a comment on it. In such a case, there is always more than one narrative level. An epistolary novel has the story told in the letters (of the letter-writing characters), and (at the other level) the story told about these characters between those letters. (87)

Likewise, while narration in games is carried out by the player and the GCD during the play sessions, the GCD may decide, in order to sustain the consistency of the story's structure and as a means of guidance to the player, to insert nonplayable segments that the player has no control over. Stanzel's distinction between narrating and experiencing selves becomes artificial in this case and is only upon occasion simulated or staged by the GCD to create diegetic temporal depth. In many ways, the GCD takes over the narration and speaks for the player who is already in character; that is, the GCD imitates the protagonist's voice while the player impersonates him or her, in which case the player receives information about transitional points in the narrative in order to coherently move to the next chapter. During the play session, when the GCD does not force a filmic sequence upon the player or intervene with a statement (vocal or written) that the protagonist (the fictional character and not the player) says, the player narrates as he or she perceives and experiences, bringing to mind the grammatical equivalent of the present tense, where the temporal and psychological distance between the narrating "I" and the experiencing "I" is zero.⁴⁰

H. Porter Abbott's definition of "distance" reinforces this concept since he talks of "the narrator's emotional distance from the characters and

the actions (the degree of his or her involvement in the story)”⁴¹ This distance is annulled in video games by the fact that the player in first-person games is a narrator who always tells a story of personal experience as it takes place. This fact directs us toward a narrative situation that is particularly germane to game fiction: simultaneous narration. Herman and Vervaeck describe simultaneous narration and its effects as requiring

the use of the present tense because only that enables the perfect coincidence of action and narration...to create the impression [the narrator] tells you everything the moment it happens...if the narration were really to coincide with the action, the narrator would be talking and experiencing at the same time. (p.87)

Jahn’s definition of simultaneous narration further supports the indications that it best describes the type of narrative situation in game fiction:

A type of homodiegetic narrative in which the narrator tells a story that unfolds as s/he tells it. The problematic logic of this type of narrative situation demands that the narrator does not know how the story ends, that there can be no objective flashforwards, that all diegetic sentences are in the present tense, and that the narrating and experiencing selves overlap and merge. (“Narratology”, N3.3.11.)

What is most striking about Jahn’s definition is that the present tense logically necessitates the impossibility of the narrator knowing the end of the story, which is obviously the case in game fiction. Genette writes that simultaneous narration clears the narrative from temporal manipulations:

[Simultaneous narrating]...is in principle the simplest, since the rigorous simultaneousness of story and narrating eliminates any sort of interference or temporal game... A present-tense narrative which is “behaviorist” in type and strictly of the moment can seem like the height of objectivity, since the last trace of enunciating that still subsisted in the Hemingway-style narrative (the mark of temporal interval between story and narrating, which the use of the preterit[e] unavoidably comprises) now disappears in a total transparency of the narrative, which finally fades away in favor of the story. (218–219)

In game fiction, temporal manipulations exist, but they are embedded in the present tense, defining experience. For instance, flashbacks in games represent different time zones created by the GCD: zones in which the player could be transformed into a viewer with no control (e.g. during

a noninteractive cut-scene). However, the flashback may have another meaning in games as well: the player can also be transported from the present to a time in the past where he or she plays – and narrates – in the present (of that past).

Here we should have a look at Dorrit Cohn, who writes extensively on simultaneous narration in *The Distinction of Fiction*. She summarizes the accepted convention among literary theorists, such as Paul Ricoeur, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, Kate Hamburger, and Robert Scholes, that a narrative can be in only the past tense: “live or tell” (in the words of Roquentin, the protagonist in Sartre’s *Nausea*).⁴² Cohn describes her study of simultaneous narratives as a response to the modernist trend of creating a narrative discourse in the present tense. She reminds us that, despite Hamburger’s argument about the obligatory temporal distance between the past of experience and the present of narration, it is generally accepted that intermittently shifting tense from past to present may be briefly used to enhance vividness in third-person narratives. In Charles Dickens’ *David Copperfield*, for instance, we find a narrative in the past tense that shifts to the present tense in the burial scene of David’s mother, and then it shifts back to the past tense. Cohn maintains that such short present tense usage is deemed structurally harmless in the traditional narratological view only if the present tense is embedded in “the normal tensual surrounding”.⁴³ To her, first-person narratives are – traditionally – wholly in the past because they imitate autobiographies, memoirs, letters, oral confessions, and journals. Cohn wants to break with the traditional view and claims that first-person narratives in the present tense are “neglected if not denied”.⁴⁴ Among the various examples of present-tense first-person narratives she mentions, her textual paradigm is J. M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Cohn zooms in on first-person narrators who tell their stories entirely in the present tense⁴⁵ and asserts that this type cannot be subsumed under other narrative categories but rather constitutes an independent category: “Its innovation, to state it bluntly, is to emancipate first-person fictional narration from the dictates of formal mimetics”.⁴⁶

Cohn brings into focus three interrelated features of simultaneous narration. First, there is the incongruity of its narrative situation in that simultaneous narration is characterized by discouraging questions about who narrates and not calling attention to the temporal relation between narrated experience and narrating instance. Second, the semantic implication of its narrative tense is that present-tense first-person narration

creates tension, instability, flexibility, and ambiguity. Third, the absolute focalization of the narrative experience (focalized self-narration) presented in simultaneous narratives reduces the temporal hiatus between the narrating and experiencing selves to zero.⁴⁷ When we try to apply this to video games, we find that it is not quite clear whether simultaneous narration in games may also be said to discourage questions about the narrator and diminish the attention to the temporal relation between narrated experience and narrating instance. However, the second and third features are clearly just as applicable to simultaneous narration in first-person game fiction. The second feature of tension, instability, flexibility, and ambiguity is crucial to the experience of games because the player is present in a live situation, which means that his/her lack of knowledge affects the possible outcome of confronting the fictional world. The third feature, namely absolute focalization and the collapse of distance between narrating and experiencing selves, brings us to the study of the player's second role in the game narrative: the player-as-focalizer, which results when the player assumes the role of the protagonist. By way of transition, we should look again at what Stanzel writes:

The simultaneous concentration of the focus of presentation on the experiencing self can also be observed in the quasi-autobiographical first-person novel, although only temporarily. . . . [I]n first-person novels such as *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Catcher in the Rye* and Iris Murdoch's *Under the Net*, the narrating and the experiencing self can hardly be distinguished, since the presentation is focused here almost entirely on the self in its Here and Now of experience. (225)

Focalization and perception

The player's second function is on the level of the narrative. This is a cognitive function as the player assumes the role of the perceiving character – also called “focalizer”. Mieke Bal maintains that while the narrator narrates, the focalizer is an aspect of the story this narrator tells,⁴⁸ and Manfred Jahn defines the focalizer as

The agent whose point of view orients the narrative text. A text is anchored on a focalizer's point of view when it presents (and does not transcend) the focalizer's thoughts, reflections and knowledge, his/her actual and imaginary perceptions, as well as his/her cultural and ideological orientation. (“Narratology”, N3.2.2.)

Herman and Vervaeck,⁴⁹ Coste,⁵⁰ and Jahn⁵¹ all affirm that point of view is problematic and ambiguous. Simply put, the notion of focalization is situated in between the two levels of narration and narrative. On the one hand, when an important source on narratology such as Herman and Vervaeck's *Handbook of Narrative Analysis* presents the concept of focalization on the level of narrative rather than on narration, this judgment appears valid since focalization is by definition anchored to a character's perception. On the other hand, the fact that the narrator may be present among the characters muddles the clear-cut separation between narrator and focalizer. Genette and Chatman assign focalization only to characters (focal-characters), but many other narratologists follow Rimmon-Kenan when she acknowledges the existence of a "narrator-focalizer", in which case the focus of perception is attributed to the narrator – hence the distinction between internal (character-focalizer: character's focus of perception) and external focalizers.

Originally, the notion of focalizer was meant to distinguish between two questions: *who speaks?* (pertaining to the narrator) and *who sees?* (pertaining to the character). But the revisions of this concept have resulted in two additional considerations. First, the question should not be restricted to only *seeing*, since more senses, as well as mental responses, might be involved, and therefore, focalization has come to designate the center of perception. And second, if the narrator is a character, as in first-person narratives, narration and focalization may often overlap. Indeed, the identification of focalizers in printed narratives repeatedly turns out to be impossible:

The focalizer can be hard to determine. At the beginning of the novella "Sugarplums" ("Suikerpruimen") by Huub Beurskens, the character Stein appears to be the (internal) focalizer, but certain passages suggest (external) focalization by the narrator. At one point Stein and Patty John are sitting on a restaurant terrace: "In between the private yachts and the small fishing boats, the dark water reflected the many little colored lamps." Who sees this? Stein or the narrator? Impossible to decide. (Herman and Vervaeck, 73)

In spite of such difficulties, Chatman, Herman and Vervaeck, Genette, Stanzel, and Bal insist upon the usefulness of treating the aspects of perception and narration separately. Genette founds his definition of mood (his term for focalization) on the grammatical definition of "mood" in the French *Littre* dictionary: "The different points of view from which the life or action is looked at".⁵²

Chatman distinguishes between narration and focalization in the same manner: “Point of view does *not* mean expression; it only means the perspective in terms of which the expression is made.”⁵³ Bal advocates for a distinguishing between narrator and focalizer in order to better understand the possible interrelationship among textual agents:

When the connection between these two agents is not self-evident, it becomes easier to gain insight into the complexity of the relationship between the three agents that function in the three layers – the narrator, the focalizer, the actor – and those moments in which they do or do not overlap in the shape of a single “person.” This non-overlap also holds for narratives in visual media. (Bal, 19–20)

The distinction between player-as-narrator and player-as-focalizer is needed for two reasons. First, it helps us distinguish between the narrative voice and the center of perception, a distinction favored by most narratologists, which gives us a clearer idea of the player’s access and involvement on different levels of narrative communication. Second, following Bal’s views on the separation of narrator and focalizer⁵⁴ at this stage of studying video game narratives, we need to understand each agent separately before we study the overlap between them and their ramifications in game fiction. Although our primary focus lies on the overlap, studying both agents separately should nevertheless be an asset in the future when the current work is expanded to game narratives in which the overlap does not occur (e.g. in third-person and isometric games).

The player-as-focalizer

The distinction between narrator and focalizer is not as difficult to make in the case of visual media (to which video game narratives belong) as it is with written texts. We already discussed that the player’s control of the camera (i.e. the camera is virtually mounted on the player’s eyes in first-person games) gives the player a level of control regarding what is seen: the player selects the information presented or, in Gaudreault’s term, is a *monstrator* type of narrator. In first-person games, the player is given the ability of what is called the *mouselook* (also known as *Freelook*), which means that the player can use the computer’s mouse (or another means of control) to rotate the protagonist’s camera view and create the

illusion that he/she is actually looking through the protagonist's eyes. In this mode, the player gets a realistic rotatable 360-degree angle, a visual illusion that locates the player inside the character's body.

The sense of control over the field of vision also results in an act of perception by the player. In most first-person games, the player does not see the character he or she impersonates during the play session unless the game world intervenes with a cut-scene (a cinematic clip) showing the character in third-person perspective. But most of the time the player is the center of perception and continues to embody the protagonist. Unlike third-person game narratives, in which the player is more of a puppet master, first-person game narratives as a rule do not show the protagonist during play sessions. We could even argue that it is the player who is actually the protagonist, while the system-generated fictional character does not represent more than an absent avatar whose name becomes the player's alias in the fictional world in order to enhance immersion and get the player in character. In the many genres of storytelling games, it is not difficult to determine who does the seeing (and listening) as it is almost always the player, despite those brief and rare occasions when the game system inserts a cinematic sequence showing another character's perception. In first-person games, the virtual camera is placed in the protagonist's eyes, which creates the illusion that the player has embodied the protagonist, and which defines the player's engagement in the story world.

The character's presence

In noninteractive fictional forms, such as novels and films, the main character is someone that we admit as a whole being; that is, we admit the character as a physical form with a set of psychological characteristics and as someone who performs a series of actions. We familiarize ourselves with this character through observation, and then we analyze and judge. The character is a question of relative interest; for example, Walt Kowalski, the protagonist in Clint Eastwood's *Gran Torino* (2008), is a lonely man with a cruel temper who constantly uses derogatory language. That language is a defining attribute of his disgruntled character and represents one of his personality traits.

If *Gran Torino* were to be made into a game, and if the player were able to push a button that releases a derogatory term during the play session

and while impersonating Walt, would the player decide to push that button every so often? The answer depends on the player: some players would and others would not push the derogatory term button. This means that Walt's personality trait is now an action determined by the player. In *Gran Torino*, the hypothetical first-person game, Walt's character would be partitioned. Players who have seen the film already know about Walt, but in the vast majority of games – games that are not based on films – the player learns about the protagonist from only the game world and promotions. The protagonist has a human form (a body) as well as certain abilities, attitudes, and a range of possible actions. This package is divided between the player and the system in a way that makes the protagonist disappear most of the time, to be replaced by the player. In a first-person game, the player gets the protagonist's eyes and sometimes arms and legs, all decided on by the system. But the protagonist's personal traits and actions are replaced by the player's own. In some games, this remains the case until the system takes control and exposes the player's fictional self onscreen in a cinematic sequence. Nevertheless, during most of the play experience, the protagonist is the player who experiences since the question the player asks normally is, *what do I do?* rather than *what would my pretend character do?* The player is dazzled by the surroundings and visuals, preoccupied with discovery and survival, and often unaware of the split-personality situation he or she is caught in. There are two identities at play: the player's own personality and the fictional personality the player impersonates. Yet the player's own personality is clearly dominant for as long as, and to the extent that, the game permits.

Chatman's definition of point of view takes into account not only the perceptual connotation of the term. It also takes into account three different meanings: "the physical place or ideological situation or practical life-orientation to which narrative events stand in relation"⁵⁵ In the first instance, Chatman refers to the literal or perceptual point of view (e.g. something is seen through someone's eyes). In the second instance, his emphasis is on a more figurative or conceptual meaning: something is presented according to someone's world view, ideology, or conceptual system. In the third instance, the term is used to indicate what Chatman calls "the transferred or interest point of view", which means that something is evaluated according to someone's personal interest.⁵⁶ When we use Chatman's definitions of point of view to think about the player in games, we find that the point of view in all of its three forms is a question

that concerns the player. First of all, by controlling the camera, the player sees – and it is noteworthy that the player's own ears also hear. Second, the player's own values are at work during the play sessions. Third, it goes without saying that the player's own interest is most valuable in the narrative. At the same time, we should not ignore that some ethical issues might force the player to reconsider his or her own interest-related point of view.

In conclusion, the player impersonates the game's character by taking its name, eyes, ears, and originally authored abilities and then tells that character's story while occupying the center of perception in first-person game narratives. For all those with the need to see the term “interactive” in the context of studying video games, the interactivity of narrative here is manifested when the first-person game genre puts the player inside the character's body to face the challenge posed by a fictional world and when the player counters the fictional world's discourse by acting and thus producing a counter-discourse that defies the system's discourse. As a result of this narrative mechanism, the story becomes a personal experience for the player – an experience defined by a challenge that could be intellectual, psychological, ethical, emotional, and/or physical. By challenge I am not referring to the obstacles and fights but to the player's defiance of the system's discourse, which will be our key to treat video games critically as we will see in the next chapter through analyses of *Penumbra Overture* and *BioShock*.

Third-person games

In third-person games, there is a major dissimilarity regarding the player's relationship to the story that leads to a fundamentally different interpretive outcome. The player is again a co-narrator in a simultaneous narrative where his or her discourse is in conflict with the game world's discourse. But the player himself or herself is not present in the story.

Unlike first-person games in which the player sees directly through the protagonist's eyes, in a third-person game the camera sits a few meters behind the protagonist. When the *mouselook/freelook* is not an option provided to the player, the player's focus is always centered on the protagonist (represented by the game-rendered avatar), and thus limiting the player's field of free vision. In this type of game, the protagonist is never absent or forgotten; the player sees the game-generated character

at all times. The player's field of vision is anchored to the graphic representation of the protagonist (the avatar), and thus, it constantly reminds the player that he or she does not personally occupy the center of events, but the player is instead represented by an avatar in the story. The player of third-person games is not a focal-character and can only be an external focalizer since the visual illusion that places the player inside the character's body is not created. Through his or her restricted ability to move the camera, the player as a co-narrator can still focalize externally as a monstrator type of narrator who, however, cannot perceive away from the protagonist.

The overlap between narrator and focalizer does not occur in third-person games either, due to the rendering of a fictional character whose continuous presence makes the player aware that he or she is involved in telling the story of someone else. This results in a different kind of relationship between the player and the story world. The player controls the protagonist's movement and actions, but the story is not as personal as it is in first-person games, because of the player's distance from the level of narrative. The protagonist becomes the player's surrogate in the fictional world where the player is only the external patronizing figure who controls the protagonist.

The narrative situation in third-person games is different from that of first-person games in that the distance between the narrator and the focalizing character does not collapse, which creates a chess-like situation: the story world resembles the chessboard and the protagonist resembles one of the pieces. In this situation, the player acts to narrate a story in which the protagonist survives the perils of the fictional world while the game challenges the player's narrative action.

Summary

The player of a game story (co)narrates through his or her play/performance. Play consists of a number of actions that fulfill the function of narration in a nonverbal manner, meaning that the player's actions have an essential impact on how the story is told as the game narrative requires the player's action for discourse creation. On the one hand, the player's actions and responses indicate his or her personality and project a form of subjective expression that substitutes for the concept of voice in printed narratives. On the other, the player's control of the

camera is a narrative function in the cinematic sense: it determines what is presented and what is left out, in addition to what is focused on and what is ignored. However, the player is not the only narrator in a game story; the game system also narrates by means of a more complex narrating agency that is authoritative and, in many ways, more powerful than the player's narration since it sets limits to the latter.

By looking at first-person game fiction from a narratological perspective, we find that the narrator, the metaphorical and anthropomorphized agent – whose type, involvement, visibility, and voice have been profoundly scrutinized in other fictional forms – is now replaced in part by a real person who lives the story as it happens. A game narrative is a live experience where the present-tense narration results in simultaneous narratives. This narrative situation is characterized by a collapse of the distance between narrator and focalizer in first-person games: the player embodies the protagonist. We do not know much about this original character's personality; the character on the box cover, the commercials, and the cut-scenes. The player's impersonation makes the authored protagonist absent. It fades out in relation to, and blends in with, the player's own personality. It is the player who really becomes the perceiving character. The player in first-person games occupies the protagonist's space, eyes, and ears; he or she experiences the story instead of the protagonist and by and large becomes the protagonist.

The player is not the only narrating agent in game fiction; the player narrates along with the GCD, the authoritative and arguably more powerful narrating agency that grants the player a narrating ability subordinate to its own. The GCD is represented by the computer program that simulates a fictional world with its own existents and events, a world that targets the protagonist with its perils and dilemmas. In that same fictional world, while the GCD tells a story of demise and bewilderment, the player strives to tell a story of survival. The mutual challenge between the player's discourse and the GCD's discourse shapes the form of the story. Unlike traditional fictional forms, in which we read about or watch the conflict of a protagonist and an antagonist and in which our response occurs only inside our more or less empathizing minds, in game fiction the conflict is more palpably our own as we find ourselves inside the protagonist's body. Thus, the story becomes a personal experience that tells us about ourselves much more than about the protagonist.

Having discussed the extant theories about both the overlap and differentiation between a narrating “I” and a perceiving “I”, we find that in game fiction both “I”s to a significant extent belong to the player’s self. Therefore, when it comes to first-person game narratives, the “I” that we need to pay attention to is the one that the player uses to refer to himself or herself because the story is ultimately about the player. This conclusion will lead us to the analytical strategy composed of a set of questions about the interrelationship between the game as a world and the player.

A player’s story

Video games are becoming more and more concentrated on storytelling in that they tend to remain by and large in the narrative ecosystem. With the incredible momentum that games are gaining as cultural artifacts, the emergence of a new kind of textuality generated by new media is reflecting and shaping both our lives in general and the way we tell and produce stories in particular.

This book is also about what it means to play the story and how you – personally – get pulled into its world. Another purpose that preoccupies this work is that of criticism: what criticism means at this time now that we’ve become accustomed to telling and perceiving our stories interactively inside a computerized virtual world. Who cares about these concerns’ being addressed would not be just those who play but also those who think, tell, write, design, and educate in the domain of video games. In what follows, and based on the player’s centrality in the game narrative, video game fiction is presented as a personalized psychological experience, a meaning-making process that allows game players to rediscover more about their own selves. Our initial understanding of the player’s co-narration with and in defiance to the game system is a key to interpretation and will grant us access to an interpretive model for game fiction that is based on the player’s subjective responses and the choices he or she has made in play.

What players say

The popular culture developed around the playing of video games is manifest on the Internet through gaming websites that host news,

reviews, discussion forums, and other features. “Walkthrough” is the term for an online document written by a player after he or she has finished playing the game. The purpose of this document is to serve as a step-by-step guide to finishing the game, usually including an overview, character description, and general strategies in the introduction. The walkthrough document is always written in the second person and addresses the reader as “you”. What we can take from the most common grammatical form in walkthroughs is a reaffirmation of the subjective individuality and immediacy of the experience. In a descriptive text written by a player addressing another player, the grammatical employment of both the second-person pronoun (you) and the imperative mood – instead of using the name of the character in an external third-person description – denotes the walkthrough writer’s acknowledgment that the story is about whoever plays it and not simply about the generic name of the story’s main character. The following citation is taken from an online walkthrough for *Penumbra Overture*:

Chapter 2: A Voice in the Dark

Part 1: Let There Be Light

Walk forward and take the first route left to get to the Power room.

There are two batteries, a note and an artifact on the shelf on the right side of the door.

Use the pickaxe to smash the wooden planks guarding the big hole and push the box into the hole.

Go down the ladder and pick up the battery that fell out of the box.

Go back up.

If you now look at the generator control panel, you will see an empty battery compartment. Use the battery on this.

Leave the Power room.

Go left, then right and on the left you’ll see a barrier, a closed fence and a keypad. There’s a dog on the other side.

Go forward and turn right as soon as possible.

Walk through the door in front of you. In the room stack two boxes in front of the shelf with three boxes on it.

Climb onto the boxes and pick up a white fuse from the top shelf. Alternatively you can use the broom to shove it down.

From the other shelf pick up beef jerky, a flare and a note.

Leave the room and go right.

Enter the communication room.

Pick up the radio from one table and a note from the other.

You can hear beeping sounds from one of the radios. It’s actually Morse Code for 5738. (Pikacz and Thaliur)

A walkthrough is unlike a gameplay video that is posted online by a player. The first treats the reader as the protagonist who is in the middle of playing the story, whereas the second is a video recorded of the story while it was being played and usually with the player's own running commentary. The player's commentary is often a first-person simultaneous narration in which the player refers to himself or herself as the protagonist experiencing the events. This language was developed within the players' communities as a response to how the game story engages the player on a personal level and the consideration that the player replaces an absent fictional protagonist.

In a class discussion I led, I asked two students who were fond of playing *BioShock* about the reason why they did not choose to "harvest" the orphan character in the game, which is an alternative choice given to the player that results in the killing of the orphan child for an improved player performance in the game. The first student replied: "This is really not me." I argued: "I know it is not you, but I'm referring to Jack, the main character." The student insisted: "no, it is just not me; I won't do it" – adding that he "personally" couldn't do it. The second student's response to the same question and my follow-up argument was identical to the first. I clarified that I knew very well that neither of them would choose to kill the orphan in real life, but I wanted to know if Jack, the fictional protagonist, ever attempted to try the "harvesting" option out of curiosity since he can get away with infanticide in the fictional city. Both students' answers, however, did not change: "I just couldn't. This is not me." Both players refused to disambiguate between themselves and the main character.

Understandably, then, the term "player experience" is a common one in game design and game journalism. It is applied to various types of games, including non-storytelling ones, such as sport games, and it is considered a criterion of the game's quality in game reviews, on TV shows, and among game publishers. The game industry promises the player (the potential buyer) a realistic personal experience. The following excerpts are taken from the external box that contains the game's hardware:

As the only apparent survivor of this tragedy, *you* must fight *your* way out of hell as *you* try to discover the dark secrets of this once great city. (From the back cover of *You Are Empty*, my emphasis)

Can Philip master his fear and finally uncover the truth behind a mystery that has haunted him for a lifetime? Only *you* can decide... (From the back cover of *Penumbra: Black Plague*, my emphasis)

Indeed, it was I who decided. So let's talk about game criticism with a focus on the process of meaning-making.

Notes

- 1 Jahn, "Narratology", N2.2.1
- 2 p.13
- 3 p.145
- 4 p.189
- 5 p.105
- 6 p.210
- 7 Herman and Vervaeck, p.41–42 & Genette, p.25–27
- 8 Herman and Vervaeck, p.60, 71, 80
- 9 Scholes, Phelan, and Kellogg, p.240
- 10 Chatman, *Story*, p.146
- 11 p.147
- 12 p.153–54
- 13 p.166
- 14 p.164–165
- 15 "Narratology", N1.6
- 16 *Story*, p.147
- 17 *Coming to Terms*, p.133
- 18 "Narratology", N1.4
- 19 "Narratology", N1.4
- 20 Lintvelt, p.24–25
- 21 *Story*, p.147
- 22 *Film Language*, p.58
- 23 Laurel, p.57
- 24 *Film Language*, p.21
- 25 p.74
- 26 p.19–26
- 27 qtd. in Burgoyne, p.103
- 28 *Coming to Terms*, p.133–135
- 29 Burgoyne, p.115
- 30 FCD is a relatively recent term (2003) that has quickly attracted the attention of introductory volumes to narratology (see, e.g. *Theorizing Narrativity* by Pier and Landa [2008] and *An Introduction to Narratology* by Fludernik [2009])
- 31 p.109
- 32 p.95–98

- 33 p.114
- 34 Note that “the real world of the fictional universe” as well as “the mimetic stratum” are Martinez-Bonati’s expressions, cited in Burgoyne’s book
- 35 p.115
- 36 p.4
- 37 p.82
- 38 p.3 & 82
- 39 This is Chatman’s term to refer to the substance of expression (e.g. verbal, cinematic, balletic, pantomimic, etc.) (Chatman, *Story*, p.26)
- 40 Jahn, “Narratology”, N.3.3.2
- 41 p.189
- 42 qtd. in Cohn, p.96
- 43 p.99
- 44 p.101
- 45 p.97
- 46 p.104
- 47 p.107
- 48 p.19
- 49 notes: 31n42 & 71
- 50 p.177
- 51 “Narratology”, N3.2.1
- 52 p.161
- 53 *Story*, p.153
- 54 p.19–20
- 55 *Story*, p.153
- 56 *Story*, p.152

2

Game Criticism

Abstract: *How should the video game story be interpreted? Player-response criticism considers the nature of game fiction by centralizing the player in the analysis. Since narrative and cinematic perspectives explain the game story as a personal experience, the key to interpretation becomes the subjective analysis of the player's response. This automatically entails that in the absence of an invariable text that may be interpreted collectively in computer games, what we really have is only an ad hoc narrative construction that is subjective to each individual player and could change every time the game is played. In player-response criticism, the video game narrative is reconstructed and accounted for as post factum by the player, even as it remains fundamentally open to rewriting.*

Keywords: identity theme; player-response criticism; subjective analysis

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***Penumbra Overture*: the anticipation and the happening**

Before we start thinking about a critical model for game fiction, I must tell you what happened deep down in the abandoned mine. In *Penumbra Overture*, my alias was Philip, but before I became him I learned of his mother's death and learned that he insisted his father might still be alive. Before I started playing, and by the time I had come to realize that I would be responsible for Philip's choices, *Penumbra Overture* presented me with a flashforward: a message from the end of the story. From the future, Philip wrote to me to plead so that I would not repeat the mistake he had made, a seemingly anomalous message that I did not fully understand until my last moment in *Penumbra Overture*. By then I had become Philip and had indeed repeated his mistake. This was only a generic introduction, a ploy to get me into that world of *Penumbra Overture*. All the answers the protagonist is seeking proved to be very irrelevant; the answers I got were to questions of my own.

While seeking answers about the past, I got lost in a frozen wasteland. The temperature dropped very fast when the snowstorm hit, and I knew I had to find refuge. *Penumbra Overture* had only one option for me: a hatch that led to an underground derelict mine. All my answers lay deep in the mine that inevitably proved much deeper than one might think. First, I thought I would be telling a mystery story, but *Penumbra Overture* soon made me realize that this was not the point: the initial questions proposed by the story quickly became irrelevant. *Penumbra Overture* wanted me to answer a different, specific question: Would I overcome my deepest fears?

I understood that fear is like other emotions: its true strength lies in the anticipation of the happening rather than the happening itself. *Penumbra Overture's* world employs this knowledge by enveloping the happening with maximal anticipation. It consists of a *tour de force* of fearful suggestiveness. Before I saw what lurked in the darkness of the tunnels, the seemingly omnipotent system created for me the most vulnerable moment I could think of; it was a perfect moment for anticipation to upsurge, spread, and take over my consciousness. This moment was composed of unnerving lighting and sound. I found myself immersed in a complex mixture of darkness, dimness, and deep shadows: not enough to see what happens, but just enough to know that something would happen or was already happening. Sounds were added to this

composite to accelerate my absorption of the fact that something was about to occur. The fast-paced daunting music built up quickly, and then there was the snarling sound of an approaching monstrous dog. I had no weapon, no ability to defend myself, and nowhere to run. I became mesmerized with fear. At this point, I was open to any suggestions.

At all times, it appeared to be the game system's ambition to lead me toward subordination and submission. Impersonal messages began to appear on the screen. They were more instructions than advice: the messages said that I should hide and avoid looking at the dog. I followed the instructions, and soon enough I realized they were to be taken quite strictly. When I hid behind a wooden crate, the dim lighting turned into an unnatural glow that, according to the system, represented the adaptation of my eyes to the darkness. The rabid German shepherd passed next to me. It was obvious that it couldn't see me, but I couldn't keep looking at it. As the system promised, when I looked at the dog, I panicked and I could hear my own heart racing and my own heavy breathing, and eventually I attracted the attention of the dog. Alternatively, when I followed the instructions by not looking directly at the dog, the fear became just too palpable and the experience was utterly frustrating. The dog kept circling the area around me, and I could hear that its inhuman growls were very close. I knew I could not continue like this. My challenge was to find a way to reject the single option *Penumbra Overture* seemed to foist upon me, and my answer was to choose the happening itself over the anticipation.

Confrontation

I came to a series of realizations. First, the scenario was not going anywhere. Second, I asked myself the question, "Do I have to wait for the dog to walk away far enough so I could sneak and run to another area?" My third realization was that I was in a fetal position and denied the right to move my head. This triggered my suspicion that whoever gave the instruction to hide might be enjoying this: my almost perfect subordination. This third realization enraged me. My story was being ruined for the sake of another storyteller's satisfaction. I was in doubt about what to do but more than ever inclined to rebel.

Trying to break the stranglehold on me, I stood up. It took the dog only a few moments to detect my presence. I had to act fast and think

on my feet. I picked up a small wooden box and moved toward the dog. It turned around, growled, and charged toward me as I mumbled, “Yes, I am here”. When I threw the box at it, the dog stopped, fell down, and started whining. But it stood up and charged again. It bit me, moved away, and charged again. I picked up a rock and repeatedly bludgeoned the dog until I killed it. With the adrenaline still rushing, I mumbled again, “That wasn’t very bad, was it? Let’s find more zombie bitches”. I was still furious about finding myself painted into a corner and being forced into a passive role from which I had to extricate myself. Later, I interpreted this action as my message to the other storyteller: “Here’s your dog; this place is mine to explore.”

Improvising

How much autonomy did I have in the world I found myself in? The game’s setting presented a desolate environment that did not seem to contain any weapons, nor did it recommend any specific means for self-defense. *Penumbra Overture’s* system clearly treats the player as a personally responsible and self-reliant character, and its logic in this regard is a realistic one: in a similar real-life situation, a person would also make objects into weapons, while it would be equally up to him or her to either confront an attacker, run, or hide. Confrontation, although not suggested in any active or direct manner, was obviously allowed since I was able to carry and throw various objects, even though the original purpose of this ability had seemed to be mainly for non-combat actions. It was my responsibility to decide whether to accept a default script that makes the world of the mines ultimately intolerable or to improvise and see what would happen. My choice entirely changed the experience that seemed to be originally intended for me by the world of *Penumbra Overture*; the Philip I was in the process of construing was no longer defenseless and was now sufficiently energized to move forward, explore, and seek answers.

Understanding my fear

Penumbra Overture’s test hit a nerve and helped me understand why I always reacted to fear with anger. Fear, as I know it, entails confusion

and incapacitation. However, my worst fear turned out to be not of losing control but of the potential inability to justify how I got myself into the situation where I had lost control in the first place; this is when I become infuriated. I came to realize that I have internalized a somewhat unhealthy coping mechanism that nevertheless works in several situations: my resentment of failure created a permanent need to explain and justify, and fear is a failure that needs to be explained and justified. Fury creates the energy and courage I need to confront fear, explain what I am afraid of, and justify how I got myself in a specific unwanted situation.

My reaction worked very well in the world of *Penumbra Overture*. I had developed the feeling that my story was being written by someone else who attempted to confiscate my character and that I might not be able to justify how I lost control. This suspicion angered me and gave me courage to refuse and react. As soon as I regained control, and with the acquired knowledge that I did have sufficient means of achieving safety, I started to explain and legitimize to myself why I found myself in this place: I went down there seeking refuge from a violent storm; my goal was to find answers to legitimate questions; and the price was probably fair and manageable, especially when I found myself a pickaxe as well. This sounded very legitimate to me. However, *Penumbra Overture's* response to my justification and performance during my subterranean journey was unexpected.

The house always wins

The co-narration of another, unseen, overarching, authoritative, and unfriendly storyteller in *Penumbra Overture* was not limited to rendering the world and reacting to my actions; the game system also took over the control of Philip's character on different occasions. *Penumbra Overture* used a variety of mimetic techniques to speak on Philip's behalf and show his actions, the most frequent of which was to literally quote Philip by showing captions representing his thoughts. Usually this occurred before turning points, when the player is ready to make a choice. Such captions were usually in the form of a question that Philip asks himself or a comment intended to direct the player's attention to a clue. This does not interfere with the player's emotional response or character impersonation, because the comments and questions are always natural to the situation and mild in the sense that they do not include any important

information not yet ready for the player/Philip or any character references that could distance the player from Philip. Another technique was to control Philip's point of view in an in-game cinematic segment; for example, at some point, and out of my control, Philip turned his head around and looked behind to see an imminent danger. Such feed from the game managed to inform my decisions throughout the play.

Penumbra Overture offers the player a psychologically refreshing chance to exercise his or her free will. Nevertheless, it simulates a nonfictional fact of life: in the end free will may well appear to mean nothing. Later on, it turned out that the story was neither about how smart, resourceful, or courageous I could be, nor was it about the importance of making choices. Eventually, there was only one linear path leading to one predestined place, with a character bound to his fate. It is up to the player to lessen the fear on the journey to the best of his or her abilities, but he or she cannot change the ultimate destination. Clearly, this is not a story constructed for the lovers of happy endings.

Until the very end of *Penumbra Overture*, I was under the impression that my strategy was useful and that I would find my way out. My fear did not completely vanish, yet the experience was tolerable since I knew I was not entirely defenseless. For the rest of the story I was co-narrating, I was preoccupied with following clues, unlocking doors, and reading documents left by those who inhabited the world of *Penumbra Overture* and perished there before I had arrived. My spatial movement was always downwards: every new level proved to take me deeper into the ground. I did not realize then that by demonstrating intellectual and physical skills I was being rewarded only by getting more involved in the back story of the mine and thus deeper into the ground and farther away from the exit. I did not recognize that I was making a choice between getting answers and the possibility of escape. Nor had I already come to understand that, although promised, neither of these desired outcomes was ultimately available in the fictional world of *Penumbra Overture*.

Somebody by the name of Red was the only character with whom I interacted. He was trapped for a long time in the far end of the mine and used a radio to communicate with me. It was clear from his voice and language that he was extremely traumatized by his entrapment. Yet he was still able to give me instructions to get to him. I had the impression that I would eventually reach and save him, discover an exit, and find enough answers to make sense of the fragmented back story of the fictional world of *Penumbra Overture* before I made my escape.

The time scheme of the back story which I followed and attempted to decipher throughout the game was inversely proportional to the special movement inside the mine: the deeper I went in literal spatial terms, the more recent the events seemed to have happened. For example, the clues on the first level, the outermost one, referenced a series of mining accidents that occurred at the beginning of the twentieth century. Later, when I moved into a deeper subterranean level, the back story concerned archeological excavations that took place in the late 1960s.

Penumbra Overture granted neither answers nor escape. Its final challenge for me was to make me choose between assisting Red in committing suicide and retaining a chance of escaping from the mine. When I finally got to Red, he had locked himself inside an industrial incinerator and asked me to push the ignition button from the outside: he had lost the desire to live. I ignored what he said and moved to another area, where there was the door that I thought was the final exit. The door was locked and the key could only be retrieved from Red's remains; this is what *Penumbra Overture* had decreed. I went along with this gruesome logic, pushed the incinerator's button, and got the key. Yet I opened the door only to find that the mine kept going deeper and deeper and that *Penumbra Overture* decided that this was my last stop. I stood at the doorstep and saw a blurry human shape looking back at me from the end of the long corridor before I was hit from behind and blacked out: *The End*. Still, despite this bleak ending and even though all my endeavors eventually did not grant survival, the experience of actively assuming the positionality of being subversive had meant a lot to me psychologically.

Revisiting the underworld

I played the game three times, and as I expected, every revisit to the game's unwelcoming world proved to be less terrifying than the previous one. In the replays, I aimed at doing things differently as I hoped to avoid the depressing ending. The second time I played the game, I was already familiar with *Penumbra Overture's* environment and system, and I experienced less fear and no fury: this replay did not trigger my defense mechanism, because I knew that I did not have to follow the game's instructions that led to my angry reaction the first time. With that in mind, I discovered that it is possible to avoid confronting the dogs altogether just by running away from them to the next exit. I did not

discover this through personal experience, though. The game developer's online forum hosts *Penumbra Overture* players' discussions, and among the various topics in the forum is a question on how to deal with the dogs. Many players report that the easiest way to kill the dogs is by standing on a crate and hitting the attacking dog with the pickaxe. One player complains that combat ruins the game because the fear will be gone and thus the game loses its "style" as a survival/horror game in which the player cannot fight back. Another player replied that one should in fact avoid combat and act like a "skinny professor" (referring to Philip's character): "Just because it gives you a weapon doesn't mean you use it." A third player suggests that "you could literally sprint all the way past them [the dogs] if you knew where you were going without being touched." The second time I played the game, I knew exactly where I should go, and running past the dogs proved to work. Thus, I consciously avoided the confrontation as I realized it is avoidable in the first place, which was belied only on very few occasions when I failed to open doors before a dog caught up with me. The run itself was still terrifying, but avoiding the dogfights proved to lessen the overall horror of the experience.

The burden of fear was almost negligible during my second and third visits to *Penumbra's* world, and so, I wanted to think more creatively in order to steer the plot in a different direction. Yet I soon realized that there is no room for creativity in the game. Regardless of my emotional condition, it was very clear that all the roads lead to the same ending. Such linearity does not mean, however, that every play experience will become identical to the previous one. The first time I played the game, the fear made me want to move on from one level to the next as fast as I could, but this was not the case anymore in the second play, as I was no longer anxious to leave and was more interested in the possibilities of exploration. Among other things, I discovered a light switch that I had not noticed the first time, when I relied on my flashlight to look around quickly before I moved on. When I turned on the switch, the room was lit with an ultraviolet lamp that revealed writing which covered all four walls: "alone", "darkness", "dark", "no light", "seed", "meat", and "devour" were some of the words written on the wall. This did not mean anything to me except that Red, my helper – whom I immediately suspected to be the writer of these scribbles – was insane long before I came in contact with him and long before I entered the world of *Penumbra Overture*. A caption appeared on the screen: "There's writing scrawled everywhere, must be in ultra violet ink. Definitely the product of a deranged mind."

But whose?” This was one of the instances when *Penumbra Overture*’s system suddenly speaks in the guise of Philip, my character. The game often uses this mimetic technique to ensure that I am on the path it has intended. In this specific instance, my response to the disturbing wall writing, by suspecting Red to be the writer, represented a rare overlap in my narration and the game’s narration: I, the player-as-protagonist, entertained almost the exact same thought that the game system proclaimed the protagonist had in response to the wall writing. Seconds later, I received a radio transmission from Red, in which he confessed that he was indeed the writer. This, along with the many radio messages I received later from Red, made me realize that his trauma was far worse than what I thought the first time I played the game.

I made further discoveries the third time I played the game – that is, when I was able to trigger more events. I found more documents that provide extra information on the underworld’s back story and the different incidents occurring in it. At one point during this revisit, when I realized that I had become very familiar with *Penumbra Overture*’s world, I also began to understand that my story (the story of Philip who was lost in this world) could be just one of the many stories this underworld allows one to tell, and I wondered if anyone who would later enter this world would ever find out some spectacular truth about it or perhaps be the one who knows what really happened to Philip. Of course, this is an anomalous idea because every player who enters *Penumbra Overture*’s world does so *as* Philip, and each player will never find any traces of my own experience. Nevertheless, this idea, which betrays the fundamental ability to distance yourself from the character you are acting as (as in the world of the theater), was a very real one in my own narrative experience during a replay in which I was almost certain I would end up being lost in this game’s fictional world.

Reader-response and games

Norman Holland posits that “psychoanalysis, particularly in its theories of character, has a great deal to tell us about people engaged in literature, either writing it or reading it, or being portrayed in it”.¹ In his *Dynamics of Literary Response*, Holland finds his psychoanalytical reader-response analysis of literature on the interaction between the text and its reader. He argues that the text contains its own unity, theme, and structure,

while the reader transforms the text into a private world in which readers work out their fundamental psychological needs. Holland coins the term “identity theme” to describe the pattern of psychological conflicts, defense mechanisms, and coping strategies that readers are confronted with while responding to the text. We are born with a primary identity that we continue to develop and personalize through our life experiences until it becomes our identity theme, which Bressler describes simply as “the lens through which we see the world”.² As Holland goes on to explain,

I am...talking about much more than defenses: I mean to include the whole, large system by which the individual achieves pleasure in the world and avoids unpleasure, his characteristic pattern of defense mechanisms, methods of coping, or adaptive strategies, including his systems of symbols and values. In the largest sense, I am talking about his whole identity theme. (“Unity”, 125)

Holland’s reader-response theory follows a conspicuously subjective mode of inquiry since the interpretation is the product of the reader’s fears and needs. For Holland, the interpretation of a literary work is subjective and based on the interaction between the reader and the text: while the text triggers the reader’s fears, anxieties, desires, fantasies, and defenses, the reader makes himself or herself a part of the literary work by transforming it into a private world and developing an adaptive strategy to cope with the text. Thus, we can say that the interpretation is mediated by the text yet ultimately results from the reader’s own response.

Game fiction can be considered a computer-mediated psychological experience. However, this experience is different from what Holland theorizes about since there are more open channels of fictional communication in games. The text in game fiction is constructed differently to represent a hostile world that directly challenges the player and lays the plot’s burden upon him or her. This fictive world consists of a computer-simulated plight that tests its player: not only does the play identify with the character; the player also *is* or soon *becomes* the character. Moreover, the act of response in game fiction is not limited to the player’s response to the text: the text also responds to the player in many ways and with various levels of intelligence, which sustains the dynamic fictional communication, and so, the interpretive experience is more complex. I propose a critical model and call it the player-response model, which asks six questions about a work of game fiction.

Lois Tyson and Charles Bressler attempt to sum up the questions that practitioners of different reader-response orientations may ask about a literary work in order to unearth its meaning, the most pertinent of which are, “Can you identify your identity theme as you develop your personal interpretation of the text?”³ and “What does the text do?”⁴ These two questions are at the core of our player-response model, but they need to be developed for the medium of games. The player-response criticism requires us to ask a different set of questions related to the play experience.

Six questions

Penumbra Overture tests the player above all psychologically as the player is required to deal with his or her own fear. *BioShock* challenges the player morally; the player is led to make an immoral choice without which he or she cannot continue the story. When this choice is made, the challenge is for the player to decide how to continue in the fictional world, either with apathy to what he or she has done or through a search for atonement.

In a game’s story, the player takes responsibility for unfolding the plot by impersonating the protagonist, meaning that the player has to experience the protagonist’s plights and situations. The readers of a conventional text are, in Espen Aarseth’s description, “safe, but impotent”⁵ as their reactions resemble that of soccer game spectators watching a game on TV. In game stories, this is not the case because the players are always at risk. The plot acts against them, and every event they trigger challenges their intelligence, skills, knowledge, values, or strategic talents. The players often find themselves struggling to survive in the fictional world of the game, and even when they are not struggling, the events of the story constantly test their decision making, wits, and emotional fortitude.

To invite and stimulate the player’s involvement in its production, the story in video games revolves around a challenge that can be best seen as a player’s personal experience in a fictional world, which turns the game story into the player’s own story. The player is not only being told about the events and how the characters develop in a sequence predefined by the author; rather, it is the player’s actions, choices, exploration, scrutiny, discovery, knowledge, and growth that help to tell the story and develop

the main protagonist. In order to receive information and build understanding, this player reads, watches, and listens; and in order to tell the narrative, he or she moves, interacts, and strategizes – all simultaneously. This makes the player personally *subject* to any event in the story and responsible for progressing an antagonistic plot that resists progress and acts to impede the gamer. The story is a challenging experience in which a fictional world is pre-designed to act against the player, who impersonates the protagonist. If it is ever safe to say that without a challenge there is no game story, then the challenge is vital to interpretation. To explain the stimulus produced by the game to trigger the player's response, our first question would be this: what is the challenge that the game poses?

Second, how does the player respond to the challenge? Because we need to highlight the player's responses and interactions in the fictional world, it is important to describe how the player as the protagonist acted in the story and then track the development of their response, starting from the initial reaction and throughout the revisions of their own response. Rebellion was the case in my own response to *Penumbra Overture*. As promised in the back cover copy – “Can Philip master his fear? ... Only *you* can decide” – the game was designed to initially create a vicious cycle of frustration. There is no progress as long one plays by the rules, which triggered my angry response, and so I improvised and killed the dog that represented my fear. In *BioShock*, my initial reaction was negotiating with my own guilt by means of justification.

The third question is this: “what does the game allow the player to do?” By explaining what the fictional world affords the player, it becomes possible to delineate the boundaries of a player's influence on the events in terms of what he or she can and cannot do. Knowing the player's abilities and disabilities helps us to understand not only the choices available to the player but also the interrelationship between the player and the system. *Penumbra Overture* allows the player to improvise and use objects as weapons, but the player needs to discover this ability on his or her own. Improvisation is what the game lets you do, so you could run, hide, or fight, and each of which is a choice that affects how you would perceive the world of the story while you tell it. *BioShock*, on the other hand, lets you change your ways. The ruthless killer who murdered three people he never knew can either atone for his crime or continue in the story's world as a murderer.

There is another vital question about how the narrative was played: How does the player's response reveal his or her identity theme? In

other words, in which ways and to what extent do the player's own worldview, value system, personality orientations, psychological needs, fears, desires, defense mechanisms, and coping strategies affect the story and manage to be uncovered by the story? After I had broken out of *Penumbra Overture's* frustration, I had a better idea of my snappy reaction to fear, whereas playing *BioShock* made me better understand my reaction to guilt.

How does the game respond to my actions? This is posed to illustrate the game system's co-narration in reaction to the player's narration and to explain the consequences of the player's decisions and actions in the fictional world. This question represents the fifth step of the critical process and is concerned with the game's system, which controls the fictional world and its way of reacting to the player's choices. It is posed to explain the consequences of the player's decisions and actions and to explain what the player may learn from the response of the world. For example, whereas *BioShock* allowed me to exercise my free will, *Penumbra Overture* threw this exercise back in my face.

Does replaying the game affect the player's interpretation? This question can help us better understand whether replaying the game provides new insights resulting in a different meaning-making process. In the same way that rereading is important in reader-response critical studies, replaying should also be considered an important issue in game fiction criticism. Players often play the same game more than once, which makes us realize the need to account for replay experiences. Similarly to what happens when a reader revisits a written story, when replaying the game, the player is already familiar with the world, its characters, and its events. The changes that may have occurred to the player's own personality, in addition to the familiarity with the game's world and its discourse, may lead to a different plot direction, a different ending, even an entirely different meaning-making process.

Reproducing the play experience

If retelling is not downright inevitable, then at least it sounds only natural to use it as a critical tool. Even when assuming that others have played the same game, players tend to retell their experiences in order to reflect on the fictional experience they had during the gameplay. In the undergraduate class on game criticism I once taught, the task set

before the students is to discuss scholarly publications on game theory, search for and examine extant analytical attempts, and gather keywords to build a critical vocabulary for game criticism. In every discussion, it is the habit of students to reproduce their play experiences by retelling the story as they have individually lived it in order to contemplate the literary qualities of the game. This is a general tendency that applies beyond classrooms. Take, as an example, the analysis of *BioShock* proposed by Grant Tavinor⁶ in which he embarks on an exhaustive description of the game's different aspects. As long as he is pointing out the novelistic origin of *BioShock* (Ayn Rand's novel *Atlas Shrugged*), placing the game within the premise of the scholarly research in interactive fiction, or describing the game's technology, Tavinor does not refer to himself or his own experience. Yet he does move into doing so when he analyzes one of the main moral questions in the game:

But when confronted by the choice, I couldn't bring myself to harvest the Little Sister; in fact, the prospect of doing so made me feel queasy. And so, I saved her, an action that was accompanied by a sudden swelling of the accompanying music and my own emotions. ("*BioShock*", 98)

Like most players pondering upon their own play experiences in retrospect – after the player has played the game, lived the experience, partially narrated a simultaneous narrative in the fictional world, and acted as the main character – Tavinor reports on his gameplay as a past experience. Such reproduction or retelling in our player-response model functions as an incubator for critical reflection: it allows the player to trace and organize the elements of the experience and own responses so as to account for the meaning-making process that he or she has been involved in. This is what I attempted to do in the beginning of this chapter; I told my story as part of my past and was guided by the six questions about my *Penumbra Overture*'s experience.

At first sight, my approach may seem anomalous: I have argued previously that the narrative is a simultaneous one, and here I am proposing to report on the fictional experience *post factum*. The reason is that while playing the game, the interaction between the player and the game system is in progress – the telling has not come to a stop – and so, the construction of the story is in progress as well; that is, our interpretation is building up, but it cannot be made available for critical analysis until the experience is concluded. Our critical model embraces the tendency of reproducing the play experiences in hindsight and treats these

experiences as they have come to appear by the time we can interpret them: as past experiences.

The rationale of reproducing the played experience is simple: to tell what happened so that we can account to ourselves and others what it means. Retelling not only highlights the literary qualities of the play experience but also triggers the kind of critical reflection that allows us to understand the fictional experience as a personal one. Such experience in games is a computer-simulated fictional one that is designed to be personal, and therefore, when the telling is over and we have constructed a story, we may use the questions posed in the player-response model to interpret it. In game fiction, after all, there is no invariant text that may be collectively analyzed the way we are used to in written and cinematic fiction. There is only an *ad hoc* narrative construction that may be reported as *post factum* by the player for critical purposes. Not only do we need the player's own account because only he or she knows what happened in his or her own experience; we also need to remember that retelling the story for those who have played the same game provides others with a different perspective on the experience they lived. *Retelling* allows analysis to be extendable to other interpretations of the same story and to other stories.

This is one way of analysis that treats the game story as the player's personal experience to reveal a meaning that is the player's own by investigating, organizing, and analyzing the player's responses to the game's challenge. This model's goal is not to explain what the story tells but rather what the story tells the player about himself or herself. Let us take a look at *BioShock*, for example.

***BioShock*: welcome to guilt city**

BioShock is neither the story of how I survived Rapture, the dystopia, nor the story of what happened to me during my days in the fallen city; it is the story of what I have done there, the decision that I could not justify. The only enemy I was not able to conquer in Rapture was my own guilt, and so I write about how I survived the guilt and received a measure of consolation.

The city was my father's idea; it was his dream, his secret, and his property. My father is Andrew Ryan, a business magnate who was famous for resenting government and religion and who couldn't accept a regulated

society. He built Rapture in a location where no city could be built in 1946. His city was meant to be a place for an artist to express and for a scientist to create without fear of enforced ethics, a utopia of art and science. The city of Rapture have thrived for years as a *laissez-faire* state, and became a veritable haven for scientific, artistic, and commercial freedom until Frank Fontaine brought his business to the city.

Fontaine's lust for a fortune made him attempt to overthrow my father and take control of the city. Fontaine mass-produced Adam, the name for a medical substance that was developed in Rapture and was meant to improve healing. He built orphanages as facades to mass-produce Adam by using the children's bodies to host and process his product. Fontaine turned the use of Adam into an addiction; he funded the research to develop a variety of uses of Adam in every aspect of life. Adam can make you strong; Adam can make you beautiful; Adam can give you any bodily ability you can imagine. The product variants can also make you a better thief. My father could not stand that Fontaine was also smuggling bibles into Rapture, a prohibited item that some inhabitants nevertheless longed for. The civil unrest began when my father cracked down on Fontaine's business. Fontaine's gang was overpowered, Fontaine himself was reported dead, and the production of Adam was stopped at a time when the population was widely dependent on it. The addiction to Adam was entirely emotional. The citizens of Rapture could not accept the idea that they would no longer be able to perfect their bodies. The public panic turned into collective madness and the majority of the population was massacred in violent acts; *Rapture's* organized society collapsed.

BioShock presents three ways for a character's demise, and one difficult task to accomplish. Fontaine's tragic flaw was his greed, my father's his paranoia, and the city's citizens' their obsession with beauty and bodily perfection. A woman by the name of Brigid Tenenbaum had apparently chosen to accomplish the strenuous task of redemption, and I followed suit. I entered Rapture in circumstances I did not understand until later and for a purpose that was not my own. I found myself being helped by a man called Atlas. He gave me goals and instructions that I could not question or refuse. Although I originally thought I was helping him save his family and he promised to lead me out of the doomed city, this was all a lie.

I went by the name of Jack and never got to see the city in its good, utopian days. Instead, I entered Rapture when it was already torn apart and witnessed the chaos, madness, greed, and obsession that plagued the

city. While I was able to resist greed and obsession rather well, the tools I needed for survival were far more tempting. I used Adam, which was not my decision originally, and I succumbed to the same influences as any mad citizen in Rapture. Adam opened the door to an opportunity that I did not have the good sense to turn down: to improve my physical strength so that I could survive the attacks of the insane on my way out of Rapture.

My attackers grew stronger as I moved forward, and I needed more power, and thus more Adam. Soon I was willing to justify looting the dead bodies in the streets of Rapture, breaking into safes, and hacking vending machines in search of food, medicine, weapons, and money. Yet the only way I could get Adam was from the stray orphans in the streets – the children who had deserted Fontaine’s orphanage. *BioShock* gave me the choice either to save every orphan I encountered and extract Adam without taking the orphan’s life or to kill the orphan by extracting twice as much Adam. Atlas instructed me to choose the second alternative, but noticing that he did not insist, I preferred to save the children and get my lower doses of Adam. Until this point in my story, justification was easy: I looted and stole to survive, and I killed in self-defense. But *BioShock* had a greater moral challenge in store for me, a challenge that I did not manage to overcome.

I was led to Fort Frolic, a theater where I met Sander Cohn, a playwright and artist whose masterpiece was a sick fantasy. Sander’s art installation project consisted of a display of four photographs of his own protégés’ corpses. Silas Cobb, Martin Finnegan, and Hector Rodriguez had businesses with Cohn that ended in enmity after the fall of Rapture. When I met him, these former protégés of his were as insane as any other citizen in Rapture, but they were alive nevertheless. Cohn, the psychopath, had just finished murdering his first protégé. He had the only key that I needed to continue my escape from Rapture, and his condition to give me the key was that I kill the three remaining protégés. Thinking that I would be able to justify the murder, I killed them all, and so, *BioShock* challenged me to choose a way to make sense of the murder.

Negotiating my guilt

Immediately after my accepting Sander Cohn’s homicidal requirement to get the key, my initial response to such a moral burden was defensive.

I came up with every possible reason to justify my choice to continue playing *BioShock*. The moment I accepted the moral price for continuing the story, I started negotiating ways to avoid the encroaching guilt. On my way to find Cobb, Finnegan, and Rodriguez, I hoped they would attack me first so that I could brush the murderous mission aside as self-defense. They did attack me first, and I tried to believe that I had ended the lives of three miserable and insane killers in self-defense, but this strategy proved ephemeral. I knew exactly what had happened: I was sent to seek and kill three men whom I didn't know for the sake of my own survival, and it was not self-defense. The resulting guilt was unavoidable, and I realized that I was being challenged to deal with it. I was not ready to enjoy the impunity that Rapture guarantees. It took me very little time to admit that I paid the price for my own survival, and that justification was ultimately useless. I came to terms with the fact that repentance was my only option.

Changing my ways

Before I accepted Cohn's assignment, my wallet would be full, but I would still find myself breaking into safes and vending machines. Finding a questionable joy in fighting my attackers and exercising my physical supremacy, I continuously sought the thrill of putting my powers into effect. Unless I needed Adam, I used to avoid saving the orphans for fear of their guardians, who were much stronger than I was. Yet *BioShock* allowed me to change my ways. I wanted to change and do anything that would atone for my moral compromise. I started saving every orphan I found and got myself beaten senseless by their guardians until I liberated them, and I stopped the uncalled-for thefts. The limited exercise of free will that the *BioShock* allowed me (alongside the option of callous near-omnipotence) was enough to let me leave Rapture on good terms.

Fast coping

Away from Rapture and outside the context of *BioShock*, I have always known the value of fast and efficient coping mechanisms. My definition of psychological fortitude is not to be emotionless but rather to have the ability to quickly cope, which is an insurance against the many

contingencies of human existence and against natural reactions to unavoidable cheerless experiences. *BioShock* solidified this belief.

As a rule, my coping process begins with me, negotiating. I will exhaust all options in the hopes of denying or lessening the graveness of the happening. *BioShock* simulated a hit to what I believe is a sensitive spot in my psychological constitution: my moral value system. When I entered Rapture, I connected the city's predominant moral value system to my own. I judged the greed, obsession, and insanity, and I despised all who lived in Rapture. Later, I realized that I was only doing what every other Rapture citizen does, under the same influences and for the same reasons. My physical superiority afforded me the opportunity to wreak even greater havoc than local citizens tended to engage in and to enjoy doing so. All was justifiable when I labeled it survival. Justification was not the least bit difficult until I met Cohn. Then I did what I did, and it triggered my negotiation mechanism; I came up with different reasons, but none proved helpful. Very soon afterwards, I accepted the truth about my deed, and with that came a need to make amends. The negotiator was replaced by an acceptor; I stated the facts and navigated toward atonement and compensation. At this point, the *BioShock* experience became a reaffirmation of my fast mechanism of recovery; I am willing to accept and work with the imperfections of free will.

The moral price of telling *BioShock*

One of the children came and sat in my lap. I push her off, I shout, "get away from me!" I can see the Adam oozing out of the corner of her mouth, thick and green. Her filthy hair hanging in her face, dirty clothes, and that dead glow in her eye... I feel... hatred, like I never felt before, in my chest. Bitter, burning fury. I can barely breathe. And suddenly, I know, it is not this child I hate. (Brigid Tenenbaum, *BioShock*)

In the course of developing my narrative as a player, I came to understand that Tenenbaum was the scientist hired by Fontaine to conduct research on the orphan children in order to develop his product. She had, however, repented this part of her life and dedicated herself to saving the orphans. Tenenbaum was the only sane character in *BioShock* and represented what was left of benevolence in Rapture. She was there to attempt to persuade the player to choose saving the orphans instead of killing them. In the player's first encounter with an orphan child, she

gives Adam to the player and pleads for the child's life at the same time that Fontaine argues for extracting all of the Adam the player could get through killing the orphan.

BioShock has different possible endings depending on the player's actions. Other players make different choices. Some are known to kill the orphans in order to extract all the Adam in their bodies, and some even kill Tenenbaum herself. When one makes this kind of choice, *BioShock* ends with the player's killing Fontaine, taking control of Rapture, and bringing the remaining citizens into submission. But it also ends with Tenenbaum's condemning the player (as Jack) for his cruelty in an angry voice full of contempt. The player becomes the ruler but remains in Rapture, the sunless city.

BioShock's system proves to be a very active co-narrator and its mimetic streaming of information comes in various forms. The nonplayable characters speak directly to the player, who also overhears these characters' conversations and soliloquies and listens to their recorded voice diaries that tell different parts of the story. There are posters and advertisements almost everywhere the player goes in Rapture. These advertisements not only reveal that Rapture was an extremely commercialized consumer society but also provide the player with information about the sequence of development in the social and political situation that led to the downfall of the city.

BioShock's response to my choice of actions was both forgiving and rewarding. It responded to the choices I made later in Rapture by replacing Fontaine's guidance with Tenenbaum's help. She freed me from Fontaine's influence and led me through Rapture until I finally found Fontaine. There was a depiction of cheerful ending as I escaped Rapture to a sunny world along with the children I rescued in a final cut-scene that showed me the children growing up and living full lives in Jack's (i.e. my own) care.

My unfulfilled curiosity

After I had finished playing *BioShock*, I was very curious about the choices I did not make and the alternative path I did not take: the one that leads to a narrative about a character turning into the heartless omnipotent ruler of Rapture. I was also curious about how *BioShock* portrays and responds to the act of harvesting (i.e. killing) an orphan. My curiosity led me to search for gameplay videos of other players' experiences, and,

at that time, I found only two gameplay videos online that show how the infanticide is portrayed in the game. Despite (or maybe because of) the terrible nature of the idea, the depiction of such a choice is not graphic. It is worth mentioning that the search phrase I typed auto-completed in both the Google and YouTube search fields, which means that I am not the only player who has been curious about the alternatives offered by *BioShock*. Also worth noting, furthermore, is that these harvesting gameplay videos have attracted angry comments denouncing the players' choice to kill the orphans in the game. Nevertheless, I decided to replay the game and choose that alternative for the sake of critical analysis.

I started replaying the game after I had prepared myself for the expected and deliberately different nature of this replay. I reminded myself that this would be a different narrative in which I impersonated a different character, an evil one. I also expected that I would not have to deal with any guilt as this defied the purpose of my new experience. However, my pretend state of mind collapsed as soon as I encountered the first orphan. First, *BioShock* took control of the scene and showed the orphan child held up in my hands, and then two buttons appeared on the screen: the first reads "save" and the second "harvest". *BioShock's* visual representation of a child held up in the air was designed in a very realistic fashion: the child character's movement and voice convincingly simulated the orphan's attempt to break away from the player's hold. It took me only a few seconds to realize that the *harvest* option is clearly not for everyone and that my rational academic curiosity was insufficient to overcome my empathy with the vividly depicted child. So I continued playing the game in the same way I first played it, without even reconsidering the idea of choosing the wicked path, but also without discarding the idea, at the back of my mind, that another player/critic would after all be able to tell the story differently by choosing to perform such an unspeakable act.

What games do

In *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*, Janet Murray suggests several theoretical frameworks to think about the aesthetic property of immersion. Among other things, she describes the player's presence in the game as a visit, a metaphor implying a limitation in time, space, and allowed actions. Murray's metaphor applies well to my experiences in both *Penumbra Overture* and *BioShock*. During the

time I spent in both stories as a co-narrator, I became either Philip, who acted against his own fears, or Jack, who repented the only choice he had. The time and space were limited and so were my allowable actions and responses. In both of my narratively reconstructed critiques, I have referred to the respective protagonists as “I”. This is justifiable because neither Philip nor Jack had the kind of palpable fictional existence we are accustomed to from characters in books and films; the only protagonist in both stories was the player, who naturally thinks of himself or herself in first person. *Penumbra Overture* was my story and my challenge as I explored my personal resentment of fear and my attempt to face up to the most primordial of human emotions. In *Penumbra Overture*, my name changed to “Philip”; nevertheless, I remained myself. My experience as “Jack” in *BioShock* was structured similarly.

Here the theories of Johan Huizinga and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi are worth marshaling as conceptual precedents to reaffirm the inherent inter-relatedness of play, immersion, and challenge. In *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, Huizinga argues that play creates an alternative consciousness in the mind of the player as he or she enters a pretend world that is upheld by the player’s suspension of disbelief. In the world of play, the player is challenged for the best performance and attempts to resolve the tension that is part of this world’s aesthetics. From Huizinga’s work, we were able to learn that “tension” is part of the conceptual framework of play. The “state of flow” or the “optimal experience” that Csikszentmihalyi studies in *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* has been used by game scholars to think about the player’s immersion. Csikszentmihalyi’s “flow” is a state of enjoyment that has preconditions, the foremost of which is the presence of a challenging activity.

The “challenge” is the most intrinsic feature of the game story. When seen from a narratological perspective, the challenge results from the conflict between the player and the game world. In games, the player strives to perform his or her own actions that represent a discourse, and these attempts are obstructed and steered in particular directions by the discourse of the game world. The fact that the game story is played gives it the form of a challenge, and since the player is involved in the storytelling by impersonating the protagonist, the challenge becomes the player’s challenge and the story becomes a personal experience. This brings us to the most problematical question: “How can we interpret such a story?” The player-response is one way that takes into account the narrative structure and the nature of game fiction by centralizing the

player in the interpretation just as he or she is centralized in the story, and so, we may conclude that the game story is a personal experience of challenge, and the key to its interpretation is the subjective analysis of the player's response. This automatically entails that in the absence of an invariable text that may be interpreted collectively in video games, what we really have is only an *ad hoc* narrative construction that is subjective to each individual player and could change every time the game is played. This narrative construction may be reconstructed and accounted for *post factum* by the player, even as it remains fundamentally open to rewriting, which makes the player-response model an adaptable and extendable structure for critical discussion through six questions that center the player's/critic's attention on the response-shaping forces. It is not, however, and it cannot be, a rigorous analytical toolbox in the structuralist tradition. Rather, it responds flexibly to the essential fluidity, temporality, and openness of the video game medium.

The metaphor of the mask is another theoretical structure that Murray uses to investigate immersion.⁷ She argues that the "spectacle", represented by the arresting visuals, sustains immersion and entails wearing a mask. According to Murray, the mask metaphor applies particularly well to games when the graphic representation of the player is customized to deepen his or her unity with the fictional world. Nevertheless, if we go by my *Penumbra Overture* and *BioShock* experiences, we find that the fictional experience ultimately tells the player about himself or herself as the story becomes a playground where one explores one's own identity theme, and so, I dare to conclude that the game story offers an intimate place for one to take off the mask.

Notes

- 1 Quoted in Davis and Womack, p.64
- 2 p.73–741
- 3 Bressler, p.76
- 4 Tyson, p.176
- 5 p.4
- 6 "BioShock"
- 7 p.112

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