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Player-Response

On the Nature of Interactive Narratives as Literature

A Thesis by

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Orange, CA

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in English

May 2018

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David Winnick

May 2018

Player-Response

On the Nature of Interactive Narratives as Literature

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ABSTRACT

Player-Response

On the Nature of Interactive Narratives as Literature

by Lee Feldman

In recent years, having evolved beyond solely play-based interactions, it is now possible to analyze video games alongside other narrative forms, such as novels and films. Video games now involve rich stories that require input and interaction on behalf of the player. This level of agency likens video games to a kind of modern hypertext, networking and weaving various narrative threads together, something which traditional modes of media lack. When examined from the lens of reader-response criticism, this interaction deepens even further, acknowledging the player's experience as a valid interpretation of a video game's plot. The wide freedom of choice available to players, in terms of both play and story, in 2007's *Mass Effect*, along with its critical reception, represents a turning point in the study of video games as literature, exemplifying the necessity for player input in undergoing a narrative-filled journey. Active participation and non-linear storytelling, typified through gaming, are major steps in the next the evolution of narrative techniques, which requires the broadening of literary criticism to incorporate this new development.

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INTRODUCTION

Game studies theorist Ian Bogost argues that video games act as more than simulacra of worlds, they “are not just stages that facilitate cultural, social, or political practices; they are also media where cultural values themselves can be represented—for critique, satire, education, or commentary . . . In other words, video games make claims about the world, which players can understand, evaluate, and deliberate” within a virtual environment (2008, 119). Players are granted a sense of agency, which provides opportunities for dynamic, interactive scenarios. However, he also has spoken out against the inclusion of narratives within games, saying that “To use games to tell stories is a fine goal . . . but it’s also an unambitious one. Games are not a new, interactive medium for stories. Instead, games are the aesthetic form of everyday objects” (2017). He reasons that games bring nothing new to the narrative experience, citing *Gone Home* and *What Remains of Edith Finch* as examples of linear narratives that could be better expressed in a different medium, and that video games should be solely concerned with ludic function, or both the joy and underlying rhetorical effect of play, rather than story. “Players and creators have been mistaken in merely hoping that they might someday share the stage with books, films, and television, let alone to unseat them,” writes Bogost, “Yes, sure, you can tell a story in a game. But what a lot of work that is, when it’s so much easier to watch television, or to read” (2017). He is taking an “all-or-nothing approach;” if games do not dramatically reshape the narrative experience, then they do not do anything worthwhile, at least as far as progressing storytelling capabilities. With all due respect, Bogost fails to recognize the nuance between ludic-based games and narrative-based games. With this distinction, it is possible to see what narrative-based games can do for

storytelling. It is precisely due to their interactive nature that games, specifically narrative-based games, can provide a new dimension to modern storytelling techniques, one in which the reader/player becomes the co-creator and interacts within a newfound intertextuality. One game in particular, 2007's *Mass Effect*, is an ideal of what interactive storytelling can offer, in its use of choice as a fundamental motif. Choice as a fundamental motif provides non-linear, individualized, hypertextual agency, which Bogost fails to recognize when only considering ludology. When examined through the lens of reader-response criticism, it is evident that games can have intriguing and fulfilling narratives. Active participation is the next evolution in storytelling and literature.

CONTEXTUALIZATION

Video games cannot be examined in the exact same manner as traditional media, but it is highly preemptive to say video game narratives are no different than any other form. As argued by Bogost, there has been a reluctance to view game narratives in a similar vein as novels and films:

When you ask what unifies [*Tetris*, *Pac Man*, and *Bioshock*], it's easy to suppose like Bogost that video games are just in the business of '[showing] players the unseen uses of ordinary materials.' And similarly, when people like [Janet] Murray insist that all such video games are storytelling objects because even *Tetris* tells a story as 'a perfect enactment of the overtasked lives of Americans in the 1990s,' the case for video games telling stories can seem a little silly. (Suduiko)

When viewed from the broad category of interactive electronic entertainment, the potential of narrative games appear nonexistent. But one must not forget that traditional forms of media were initially not accepted by general society. As the cost of books fell and reading became a popular form of entertainment, criticisms were made likening novel reading to alcoholic intoxication: “It tends to make all other literary nourishment intolerable, just as dram drinking tends to make all true food intolerable, and to supersede food by drink” (Spectator). One would be hard-pressed to find such a disparaging commentary produced in present times. Film, too, upon its emergence, was subject to harsh denunciations: “When cinema first arrived on the horizon its many detractors, interestingly enough from the world of painting, blamed its verisimilitude for its lack of ‘art’” (Soudhamini). Although more of a criticism of film’s aesthetics rather than narratives, the dismissing assessment film received parallels objections being made against games. Literature, then, “is not constrained by something in the text, nor does it issue from an independent and arbitrary will; rather, it proceeds from a collective decision as to what will count as literature, a decision that will be in force only so long as a community of readers or believers continues to abide by it” and, as such, there has been a recent shift recognizing the merits of gaming’s storytelling abilities (Fish 11).

As the methods and contexts of composition have changed, the ways of understanding that writing must also change. A reciprocal relationship exists between the medium and mode of reading and writing. The forms of writing structure how the page is organized, while the act of reading the page gives shape to the grammatical and textual aspects of writing. However, with the rise of technology and the shift from the page to the screen, “If the book was organized by the logic of writing, the screen is organized and

dominated by the image and its logic” (Kress 19). With the digital surface, multiple images and texts can be displayed simultaneously within the same space. The organization and logic of the writing process has had to change to reflect the new capabilities made possible with the advent of the screen. As such, the way information is presented must also evolve alongside the new form: “But these new generic forms are not amenable to the same conceptual structures, the same structures of ideas, information and knowledge, as were the other, the older forms” (21). Presently, another shift is occurring which will yet again affect the contexts of writing. The concepts of linearity and spatiality are now changing with the invention of hypertext, the “presentation of information as a linked network of nodes which readers are free to navigate in a non-linear fashion” (Keep et al). With the advent of smartphones and the Internet, hypertexts have become a ubiquitous part of everyday life and the desire for control of other forms has spawned with it. The “system [is] tailored to individual preferences and task situations [so] that every user will feel as though [they are] entering an ‘information universe designed specifically for his needs’” (Charney 4). Users have come to expect hypertext within their everyday lives, and now there is a need for this same level of interaction within the narrative world. Films and novels, the old forms, are unable to sate this need for interactivity, whereas games, with the need for input and participation, can fill this void within the world of storytelling. Now, “The age-old desire to live out a fantasy aroused by a fictional world has been intensified by a participatory, immersive medium that promises to satisfy it more completely than has ever before been possible” (Murray 98).

Hypertextuality and interactivity have helped shaped games to “represent some of the most important storytelling in the 21st century,” as well as exemplify gaming’s advantages over traditional narrative vehicles (Ostenson 71). With games, the audience is forced out of the passive role of observer and is asked to participate with the game’s systems. In other words, play helps games act as active modes of narrative delivery, contra to Bogost’s belief that games do not bring anything new to narrative experience. Through play, the audience, now taking the role of the player, has agency in affecting the events and outcomes of the game. It is this interaction between the game and the player, the text and the reader, which ultimately modifies the experience of play: “While a reader of a typical text can become lost in the world of the book, he or she is ultimately powerless to control the narrative and can only be a spectator. In video game narratives, however, effort is required of the reader” (76). Bogost is technically correct, in that while players can choose different options, those options are just narrative paths that have already been written. However, having the player affect the direction of the story is exactly what makes unique narrative experiences. The “effort” mentioned refers to a specific form of effort, that of direct interaction and manipulation, which affects the player on multiple levels. Games blur the line between first, second, and third person perspectives. While the in-game events only directly affect the player-character, they are happening to the player, in a sense. It is the player, taking control of the virtual player-character, who must overcome a game’s various challenges and advance the story: “The more realized the immersive environment, the more active we want to be within it” (Murray 126). The critical goal for game developers is to create a narrative immersion, where players are engaged, both actively and mentally, with the world and story. By

doing so, players become more “invested in a character and his or her choices ... [because] *you* are the character making the choices and dealing with the outcomes (even if those consequences are virtual)” (Ostenson 77). This gives a “unique power to video game narratives,” allowing players to move beyond empathizing with their virtual counterparts and instead become them (77).

Having the narrative progress at the player’s will also negotiates with the issue of temporal linearity in storytelling. Whereas books and movies, generally, have their narratives unfold in a precise, successive fashion, games are a kind of hypertext. Because the main story only advances when the player chooses to play a plot-important mission, a player can spend time playing optional content, if available, and leave the primary plot for another time. Hypertextuality allows for deviations from the main story, something which most traditional narrative methods lack: “With the networked structure of hypertext, its fragmentation into recombinant units, and its rejection of the linearity inherent to chronology and causality, interactivity has made a contribution to the postmodern deconstruction of narrative” (Ryan 57). This affords the player an even greater sense of control over their virtual playground, fulfilling that desire for control that hypertexts satiate. Side quests and minor tasks can have little to no effect on the central narrative, more often than not giving the player a ludic, or play-based, reward in the form of a powerful item or experience points. Regardless of the in-game compensation, the sheer inclusion of divergent content dispels the necessity for storytelling to follow a strict sense of temporality, exclusive to the medium.

Games are unique in that they are not solely about play or narrative, or even the inclusion of both. In the worst-case scenarios, a game’s story will unfold in the form of

cutscenes,¹ “in those moments when control is taken away from the player, and the player’s actions are nothing more than means to unlock the next episode by solving problems gratuitously thrown along the way to give him something to do” (51). When agency is wrested from the player, one might as well be reading a book or watching a movie. What sets games, especially narrative games, apart is the intersection and interaction between ludic and narrative elements. A ludonarrative² approach to gaming, on one hand, addresses how player’s actions influence and progress the narrative, but on a textual level, there are three questions which are of the utmost importance:

How are aspects of gameplay and textuality reflected upon and employed creatively and/or critically by the game designers to achieve certain aesthetic and media-critical effects? How are standard gameplay mechanics modified through metafictional and metaludic devices, thus impacting the various ways player entertainment and other aspects of gameplay experience? [And] What impact do these modifications have on navigation and agency? (Bell et al 85)

Games are more than the sum of their individual parts. It is this intersection between story and play which ultimately set games apart from other forms of media. Literary devices are employed through the way the game is played, and the gameplay and mechanics are informed by the unfolding of the story. This is a distinction which most criticisms, including Bogost’s, miss due to their failure to observe games from a ludonarrative perspective. Reader-response criticism seems to unintentionally fill this void in the analysis of games, due to its emphasis on the role of the audience’s experience.

¹ Cutscenes are non-interactive sequences, usually taking the form of film clips, used to advance the plot.

² As ludology refers to the study of games and play, ludonarratology deals with the interplay between elements of story and play, in order to enhance both.

Bogost's argument is, in some ways, correct, as not all video games are concerned with narrative. He, as do other ludologists, argue that games like *Tetris*, *Pac Man*, and *Doom* are about the elements of play, making "the stories present ... just facades pasted over the gameplay, and that trying to understand video games using the tools of narrative theory is a category mistake" (Suduiko). However, these same critics ignore the benefits of having a story told through non-linear interaction. It is important to differentiate ludic-based and narrative-based games, as their goals vary slightly. Narrative games fulfill the increasing need for interaction and agency within the narrative experience, bringing forth a new element of storytelling which Bogost does not recognize: "Instead, we should focus on just those video games that clearly tell stories, and ask ourselves whether Bogost's claims about all video games holds true for these particular video games" (Suduiko). In particular, *Mass Effect* is an exemplar of how player control and hypertextuality can positively affect the narrative experience.

The *Mass Effect* franchise is one of the newest intellectual properties created by Montreal-based developers BioWare, known for their role-playing games filled with rich world-building and strategically designed gameplay. The first entry in the series, simply titled *Mass Effect*, was released in 2007, with the fourth and most recent game, *Mass Effect: Andromeda*, being released in 2017. Much can be written about all of the games in the series, and while this paper will address all of the entries in some fashion, there will be an explicit focus on the first game. However, it is important to note that the later games in the original trilogy are influenced by the earlier games, though this will be further expanded upon later.

Mass Effect takes place in the distant future of the 2180s, when humanity has already achieved interstellar travel, made first contact with a number of alien species, and have become members of the galactic Citadel. The game's narrative opens with humans on the brink of a major archaeological discovery that could unlock a hidden trove of lost knowledge, for both themselves and their allies. What starts as a search for an ancient beacon turns foul, as the dig site is overrun by some unfamiliar force. Lieutenant-Commander Shepard, a high-ranking officer in the Systems Alliance navy, goes to investigate the attack and becomes embroiled in a millennia-old conspiracy that threatens the fate of all intelligent life in the galaxy. Shepard must team up with a wide cast of supporting allies and fight against extinction.

Though he had not even conceived of video games as literary work, foundational critic Wolfgang Iser's definition of reader-response criticism as "an interaction between [the literary work's] structure and its recipient" acts as a perfect basis from which to analyze *Mass Effect*, an archetype of how games can be literature (1524). Where *Mass Effect* stands out is in its inclusion of active audience participation. The choices available to players, influencing both how the gameplay and narrative unfold, demonstrate how games can be elevated to a new level of narrative art.

CHOICE IN PLAY

The entirety of *Mass Effect*, including the ways it plays and the ways the story unfolds, center on the motif of choice. Everything, from combat abilities, to the equipment Shepard and the crew members wear, and even dialogue options, are all left

for players to manipulate, continuing a long-standing tradition of games enabling a sense of freedom once only available in *Choose Your Own Adventure* books.

The game opens with the option to customize the protagonist in a wide variety of ways. The player selects Shepard's gender, appearance, and even determines their pre-service background and psychological profile (BioWare 2007). It is quite possible for players to make a character that represents one's own appearance. Avatar³ similarity and identification "can be an independent source of enjoyment in computer games," giving players the opportunity to create another bridge with which they connect to the character (Trepte and Reinecke). Rather than an intersection between "the narrator, the characters, the plot, and the fictitious reader," *Mass Effect* primes players to be prepared for multiple interpretations of the game's events and occurrences, "Hence no single textual perspective can be equated with this imaginary object [the text], of which it forms only one single aspect" (Iser 1528). Right off the bat, players have the freedom to make Shepard their own. These options are not just for cosmetic fulfillment. Non-playable characters will react to the protagonist differently if Shepard is born on Earth versus on an extraterrestrial colony, or if they are a war hero or the sole survivor of some terrible attack. The selections that players make at the beginning of the game are a microcosm of the number of options available throughout the game.

As a motif, choice is a critical aspect not just in story, but in play. Along with the narrative and aesthetic choices, players also pick a class⁴ at the game's outset. These classes limit the abilities and proficiencies available to the character, determining how

³ An avatar is a graphical representation of the user or the user's alter ego or character, representing a particular person within a game.

⁴ Character classes are the specific archetype that determines characters' roles in combat, which each have unique abilities and compliment teams differently.

certain characters interact with the player-character and providing players with defined functionality during the game. Each option is valid and effective, both in terms of ludic and narrative interaction. Players are able to pick from becoming a Soldier capable of wearing the heaviest armors and all armaments, an Adept able of manipulating gravity as both a weapon and a shield, an Engineer who activates mechanical tools to assist in battle, or a Vanguard, Sentinel, or Infiltrator, hybrid classes which combine some aspects of multiple proficiencies (BioWare 2007). The freedom afforded to players when creating their character's fictional backstory extends into all aspects of the game's moment-to-moment interactions. Players are free to travel down any of these avenues in order to feel like a true veteran of war, and although expert players are able to exploit the game's systems and create overpowered characters, a novice can complete the game using any play style. As the plot progresses, even more options for customization and character development become available. Throughout the game, when players defeat enemies and obtain experience points, Shepard and the crew will level up, slightly improving their base statistics and provide players with talent points. These points can be spent to further improve the characters' proficiencies with weapons, increase their health and damage, unlock powerful new combat skills, or further augment previously attained abilities (BioWare 2007). Even after playing for hours, players can continue to further alter their player-character, deciding whether they want to be in the front of the battlefield or supporting allies from the background. Players are free to play the game how they want to play it, not being railroaded into utilizing the exact same mechanics as everyone else. This freedom of choice is reflected beyond just the game's combat and is represented in the player's ability to explore the in-game worlds.

The game opens with a lengthy tutorial sequence, in which the player learns how to navigate with and command the player-character. Such a device might support Bogost's contention of play over narrative, privileging teaching the player ludological mechanics over establishing the primary plot. However, such a sequence can be logically framed within reader-response theory. A text, in this case, the tutorial, "does not contain meaning: despite being written upon, it is a tabula rasa, a blank slate onto which the reader, in reading, actually writes the text" (Lang). Tutorials are a necessity in modern games, and rather than having it center solely on teaching the rules of play, *Mass Effect's* tutorial establishes expositional context and situates both the player and player-character in position to begin "writing the text" of their adventure. Once the contextual framework of the game is settled, after Shepard is given their mission, the galaxy is literally opened up to the player, as Shepard is made the captain of their own vessel, the Normandy. Now having access to a ship, the player is free to complete the game in whatever order. With the exception of a few planets, any of the game's levels are open to the player at their leisure, with a large amount of side content, in the form of short missions or explorable worlds.⁵ Within the levels themselves, there are multiple results that can occur based on the way Shepard completes the mission. "[The] opportunity to have a personal, agentic, and consequential role in resolving a dilemma" helps players care about the events occurring in the game, as well as providing an avenue for players to make choices reflecting their identities or fantasies (Barab 525). If one decides to save a group of prisoners instead of capturing the bad guy, the ending of the mission will be different than if one pursued the villain and let the prisoners die. As demonstrated with the class

⁵ I have reached 100% completion in every *Mass Effect* game, having beaten every level and seen all of the content. The first *Mass Effect* takes roughly forty hours to fully complete, with about ten hours required for the main story. That means it is about 75% side content! That's a lot of extra game!

system, there is no singular “correct” way to beat the game, as the choices players make nevertheless propel them forward in the plot. The interaction between the game’s systems and the selections players make inform how, not if, the game occurs, “[inducing] and [guiding] the reader’s constitutive activity” (Iser 1531).

Bogost raises two important questions concerning the discovery of the story, asking “Are the resulting interactive stories really interactive, when all the player does is assemble something from parts? Are they really stories, when they are really environments?” (2017). If certain plot points in the main story occur no matter what choices are made, then how is the reader/player constructing their own story? He is suggesting that unless players can exert direct agency upon the narrative arc, the player is only watching a film and choosing which scenes to view. Reader-response theory, however, posits the importance of the reader, not the story itself as an object, creating meaning. When a player is interacting within a specific scene, determining where the player-character goes and what is said, “Literal meaning ... [becomes] independent and the right of the reader at a given context and as the context differs the literal meaning differs because we are never ‘not in a’ situation and not in the interpretive act” (Raj 2). It is up to the reader/player to construct meaning from a scene. What matters, when the player picks a specific dialogue option for their character, is how the player receives that scene. What that meaning exactly is, is indefinable: “It is an experience; it occurs; it does something; it makes us do something ... what it does is what it means” (Fish 32). Significance is derived from a subjective level, unique to the individual undergoing the experience. Regardless of whether the plot’s ultimate outcome is predetermined, it is the interaction between player and game that matters.

Games can also act as artifacts which embody rhetorical structures. At work alongside a game's technical systems are "large-scale value-systems that have historically informed and defined the concept of play" (Salen and Zimmerman 487). Play can act as a community of practice, where the rules create an abstract state of possible meaning. For Bogost, who views games as the aestheticized form of real world objects, a game's possibility space becomes a model for the real world, where the player is inherently persuaded toward a specific ideology. However, player agency affords a new freedom that allows for players to blur the lines between ideologies. The various choices players make affect the Paragon and Renegade meters, bars in the game menu that represent how heroic or ruthless Shepard has been in pursuit of the mission and which can expand independently of one another. By exercising one of these options, depending on how developed their Paragon or Renegade levels are, players can unlock more conversational opportunities, which can reward the player with additional experience points, loot, or altogether avoiding a combat situation. This further incentivizes the player to determine which outcomes are most desirable and instills players with a determination to reach these goals:

They represent how closely Shepard 'follows the rules' in pursuit of good, a measurement of divergence from a lore-based code of conduct. This slight difference between morality system and divergence from the law gives players a great amount of freedom. It would be strange to see a 'good' character take 'evil' actions, but even a Paragon Shepard can make Renegade decisions now and again. (Albor 2012)

One is not necessarily locked in the dichotomy between good and evil. Where some games provide players with a binary morality system, *Mass Effect's* has a greater complexity to it. This system allows for a range of options which define the complexity of Shepard's character, further deepening the ways in which players can create their own unique experience with the game's characters. With this broadening of the mechanic of choice, the ludic rhetoric of the game compliments the narrative, facilitating the symbiotic relationship between the two systems.

The player's relationship with the game is "a process set in motion and regulated by, not a given code, but by a mutually restrictive and magnifying interaction between the explicit and the implicit, between revelation and concealment" (Iser 1527). It is up to the individual to, in a sense, communicate with the game and regulate the narrative based on the decisions made throughout the adventure. Choice, and the consequences that come with it, are key to the experience inherent within *Mass Effect*.

CHOICE IN STORY

The effect of the diversity in choices available through the gameplay is the creation of divergent storylines in *Mass Effect's* plot. *Mass Effect*, in its design as an open-world role-playing game, is an example of a game that gives players "contexts for creative player expression, with multiple solution paths ... as opposed to their ability to create a more-or-less common experience" (Squire 170-171). Despite *Mass Effect* having a singular, universal story for players to experience, the choices players make greatly affect the ways the story is experienced, exemplified by reader-response theory.

In truth, Bogost's concerns about interactive stories merely being environments are valid. 2010's *Mass Effect 2*, considered the best game in the franchise, had essentially three endings, as compared to one of its contemporaries, *The Witcher 2: Assassin of Kings*, released in 2011, which had sixteen potential endings. In a sense, *Mass Effect* provides players with illusion of choice, where players "feel as though [they're] making a choice, when, in reality, there's either no alternative option actually being presented or the consequences of that choice are negligible" (Extra Credits 2013). While this may automatically seem like a bad thing, that is not necessarily the case.

Bogost assumes that in order for games to present a new kind of narrative, they must accomplish something similar to Holodeck from *Star Trek*, a device where "players could interact with computerized characters as round as those in novels or films, making choices that would influence an ever-evolving plot. It would be like living in a novel, where the player's actions would have as much of an influence on the story as they might in the real world" (2017). While this is currently impossible, it does not lessen the effect that game narratives can have. Developers have to limit the player at some point; divergent and procedural narratives are, as yet, beyond the bounds of possibility. With *Mass Effect*, while the choices themselves may not ultimately manifest in a unique ending, decisions players make do affect the way the story plays out. Reader-response theory sees the illusion of choice as a strategy to provide "the gaps arising out of dialogue ... [stimulating] the reader to fill the blanks with projections. ... Whenever the reader bridges the gaps, communication begins" (Iser 1527). Although blanks specifically refer to the interpretations based on what is said versus not said, they can nevertheless be applied to the context of games. In this sense, *Mass Effect* was written and designed with

blanks in mind. There are points where the action will stop and players are required to make a decision, the outcome of which affects the way the story unfolds for the individual player: “participation means that the reader is not simply called upon to ‘internalize’ the positions given in the text, but he is induced to make them act upon and so transform each other, as a result of which the aesthetic object begins to emerge” (1532). Depending on which options the player chooses in a specific context, different missions, full of unique dialogue and content, will be available, while others are locked and cannot be accessed. The game becomes “a product of interconnection, the structuring of which is to a great extent regulated and controlled by blanks” (1528). Combined with the underlying meaning derived from play, the process of this experience is accentuated from traditional media. Games provide both interactivity and replayability at a far greater level than books and films. Thus, while the game’s endings might not truly be affected, how one reaches the end will be.

On the frozen planet Noveria, Shepard encounters a Rachni queen, the last of an ancient race, long believed to be dead, at the center of a centuries-old conflict. Players are then given the options to either release the queen and let her raise a new society of benevolent Rachni, or destroy her and stop the threat of an old foe from reemerging (BioWare 2007). Regardless of the choice players make, they will be able to continue the game’s narrative. What is affected is the player’s ability to access certain levels over others; if one decides to kill the Rachni queen, content involving her in later games will be restricted. When players’ actions are able to influence the events of the game’s story, they are provided with a sense of importance missing in other forms of media. The player’s input elicits an internal sense of agency “when the user interacts with the

product[.]... [E]motions and feelings ... are result of [those] interactions” (Korhonen 247). This creates a unique relationship between the player and the game; knowing that one’s actions really do have some consequence affects how one performs actions, forcing the player to be constantly aware to the occurring events, in order for them to make the decisions that will lead to their desired conclusions. Or, more realistically, one can just reload a save file.⁶ Nonetheless, there is something to be said about the individualization of gaming: “for players, there is no one game that is played” (Squire 175).

Because the game centers on the player’s ability to determine his/her story, a suitable antagonist would be one that stands in direct opposition to the game’s primary themes. The player comes into contact with the game’s antithesis of choice in the form of the Reapers, a collective of sapient machine intelligences bent on systematically purging the galaxy of intelligent species every 50,000 or so years. What make these dreadnoughts so terrifying are their unknowable nature and their antithetical purpose in relation to the motif of choice. Even within *Mass Effect*, which itself acts as a hypertext, there is a hypertextual mechanic that allows for the player to further their own knowledge and experience, “uniting a text B ... to an earlier text A” (Genette 5). Throughout the game, when encountering a new species or mention of some technological breakthrough, a submenu called the Codex will be updated. Players can read through the Codex for supplemental information on almost any of the game’s lore, from the history of humanity’s first contact, to how mass effect fields augment weapon capabilities (BioWare 2007). In a world of scientific discovery, nearly everything sits inside of this

⁶ Many modern games work in similar fashion to other computer applications. If a player wants to take a break, they can simply save their current progress, and open the file and continue at a later time. In games with branching narratives, it is possible to exploit the save function in order to see the divergent paths; if a player saves before an important decision, it is possible for them to reload their file and make a different choice if they do not like the outcome.

definable scope. Except for the Reapers, who are the only lifeforms not mentioned within the Codex. The only mention of Reapers within the first game's Codex appears when reading the entry on Sovereign, the first Reaper players come into contact with. When everything, including ammunition upgrades, is clearly described, to be unknowable is frightening, which only aids to make these monoliths of destruction even more terrifying.

It is not until late into the game, when conversing with Sovereign, that this information is made available to the player, and in this same conversation it admits to the Shepard, ““Your civilization is based on the technologies of the mass relays, our technology. By using it, your society develops along the paths we desire”” (BioWare 2007). This is earth-shattering, to discover that thousands of generations of evolution and expansion have all been planned out by something far greater, but if the Reapers are to be believed, all intelligent life across the Milky Way galaxy has developed according to the Reaper's specifications. Life is an experiment to them, and all of the decisions the various species have made over the course of millennia are to be rendered futile when their invasion begins. Even as a player, your actions have fallen in the realm of possibility space for the Reapers, who decide that your discovery will not impede their goals. This conflict, between free will and determinism, between being “directly aware of our deliberations” and making decisions based on our awareness, and having “every event (effect) [being] completely determined by a physical cause” outside of our choices, is recurrent in literature and philosophy, and is still hotly debated today (Baronett 349). Is every step of one's life already decided, or does one have the autonomy to live according to one's own choices? The player must fight for choice and survival in the face of oblivion throughout the trilogy, and though at times only the illusion of choice is

presented before the player, the story can and must continue based on your decisions. It is the player's ultimate goal, to fight against the inevitability of the cycle and prevail against it, in order to ensure future existence and autonomy.

Although there is not total freedom available to the player, the story can branch off in any number of semi-distinct paths as it eventually leads to the trilogy's conclusion. Lacking the depth desired in choice-driven role-playing games, the *Mass Effect* series does attempt to reconcile the numerous decisions made by players and address them as a determinate factor in the games' endings, interweaving the rules of play with the story in order to create a ludonarrative hybrid. *Mass Effect 3* introduces the Effective Military Strength (EMS) rating. A major motif of the series is the collection of allies and assets that will help Shepard in a final, apocalyptic battle, but where the first two entries in the series primarily reflect this theme in the story, the third entry incorporates the theme into its gameplay as well. Every successfully completed mission will net players with a higher EMS, with certain decisions affecting the types of resources Shepard will receive. Upon reaching the minimum-required EMS, players unlock the base, worst case scenario "bad" ending; a higher EMS rating unlocks different options for Shepard to select in the final mission, leading to the far more preferable "good" endings (BioWare 2012). Players are not solely limited to acquiring EMS assets in *Mass Effect 3*, however. The Rachni queen side-plot, mentioned earlier, can also provide players with war assets necessary for the game's multiple endings. The endings themselves, while missing a sense of great variation, are influenced by the decisions made throughout the trilogy and players' willingness to access all of the games' content. The player's choices do not explicitly affect the events presented in the game's final scenes. Instead, they determine what

endings players can observe and modify how those endings play out. In a series attempting to take into account literally hundreds of variables, *Mass Effect* tries to provide players with a sense of their decisions carrying across the trilogy. With so many variables and opportunities for choice, each player's Shepard becomes an incomparable individual, a simulacrum of a human, separate from all others, and one's own save file of *Mass Effect* becomes a singular version of the main story.

Serializing and sequels can be a major issue within the context of narrative-based games. How can such a thing exist if one's reader/player experience is vastly different from another's? The question of a canonical Shepard reached a critical head in 2017, when BioWare released the latest entry in the franchise, *Mass Effect: Andromeda*, which takes place two-and-a-half million light years away in the eponymous Andromeda Galaxy. After the game was announced, there was a question consistently asked by fans of the series: will choices and data from the previous games carry over? The *Mass Effect* games are well-known among the gaming community for allowing players to import data from a previous game to its sequel. *Mass Effect 2* is influenced by the decisions made in *Mass Effect*, and the same goes for *Mass Effect 3*. With *Andromeda*, however, the setting, characters, and events are separated from the games in the main trilogy, in both time and space. In the *Mass Effect* community, there are players who love to compare their Shepards to one another in order to recognize the different decisions made by others. Before *Andromeda*'s release, however, these comparisons were made as an attempt to answer "the philological question of how the text is 'properly' ... understood" (Jauss 1415). Is there one valid way of experiencing Shepard's story? Endless variations of "How are we going to transfer our choices?," "What happened to Shepard and the Milky

Way?,” and “Does ME Andromeda look at game saves from ME3 or other previous games ... or is this game completely stand-alone?” can be found by just quickly using an online search engine (GameFAQs). The gamers who asked these questions missed the entire point of their ability to create a unique Shepard and BioWare’s decision to place the latest game in a new setting. By building and shaping their character over the course of the three main games, players have made their own protagonist. They experience their story in a way that is completely subjective and exclusive to the each individual player. It is only through this that “the work enters into a changing horizon-of-experience ... in which the perpetual inversion occurs from the simple reception to critical understanding, from passive to active reception” (Jauss 1407). Creating a canon set of choices for Shepard would betray the experiences of all those who made *Mass Effect* their own, and BioWare cleverly determined the best possible way to address this issue.

In an interview, general manager Aaryn Flynn told the gaming community at large, ““We want this to be a new story and it would be very hard to say it’s a new story but also that you need to understand how [the past trilogy] ended,”” confirming that “Andromeda would not acknowledge your personal trilogy ending decision - in order to ensure the new game works as a fresh chapter for the franchise” (Phillips). The impact of Shepard’s actions does make its way into the game, but the ultimate fate of the galaxy is left solely at the end of *Mass Effect 3*. Almost paradoxically, this answer is a legitimization of the intimate experiences exclusive to each player in the series. It does not suggest that players’ decisions would not matter in the future of the franchise. On the contrary, it emphasizes the importance of the decisions made by everyone. No one’s time with Shepard is privileged over another. Each instance of *Mass Effect* is as valid as the

next, whether one made a Paragon Vanguard who brought peace between the Quarians and the Geth, or a Renegade Soldier who kept the Krogan Genophage intact.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Reception theory began as an application of reader-response theory, viewing the public's negotiation of and opposition toward interpretations of a text. Examination of the critical reception surrounding a text provides insight into the "triangle of author, work, and public, [where] the last is no passive part, no chain of mere reactions, but rather itself an energy formative of history" (Jauss 1407). A reader's response is the summation of their own experiences, expectations, and biases, which can evolve over time and across cultures. In literature, and especially more-so in games, reception history plays a vital role in the future of a text beyond its publication.

In this sense, reception history aligns with the process theory of literature, as well as reader-response, championing "Composition – putting things together ... [as] a continuum, a process that continues without any sharp breaks" (Berthoff 11). Generally, a text is considered complete when it is presented to the public. Process theory challenges this notion, asking writers and readers to view texts as existing in a fluid super-state, existing between multiple versions of itself. In this way, a text is not complete upon publication; there is still opportunity for revision and, for the purposes of this essay, criticism. By ignoring a text's reception, the public deprives "literature of a dimension that inalienably belongs to its aesthetic character as well as to its social function: the dimension of its reception and influence" (Jauss 1406). Ignoring how others understand and interact with a text detracts from a complete understanding of the text. Between

charting changes over the course of a series and the developer's ability to create downloadable content and patch fixes, which can be created and installed to a game months after its release, criticizing and evaluating criticism of games is vital for its growth as a genre. Reception is not limited solely to those who interact with the text. Along with its intended audience, it is vital to understand the opinions of the realized audience and the public at-large.

Some critics argue against critical reception as a valid aspect of appraising a text, claiming that a text should be evaluated in terms of just itself. Why should a text, they ask, be valued by what others think of it instead of its individual merits? While this is a valid criticism, reception history provides scholars with an additional lens to view the examined text:

The relationship of literature and reader has aesthetic as well as historical implications. The aesthetic implication lies in the fact that that the first reception of a work by the reader includes a test of its aesthetic value in comparison to with other works already read. The obvious historical implication of this is that the understanding of the first reader will be sustained and enriched in a chain of receptions from generation to generation; in this way the historical significance of a work will be decided and its aesthetic value made evident. (1407)

Texts are always going to be reviewed in their relationship to other texts. No text exists in a vacuum; art is always influenced by the progress made by others before. Ignoring this aspect of a text only aims to limit a complete understanding of it.

An exploration into *Mass Effect's* critical history reveals its lofty position among the gaming community. On its release in 2007, critics and fans alike lauded the first *Mass*

Effect. It received nearly universal acclaim for “delivering a terrific new universe, [and providing] a fun blend of action and role-playing, and a deeply satisfying story” (Ocampo 2008).⁷ BioWare, already beloved by gamers for their previous role-playing games, knocked the proverbial ball out of the park with this intellectual property. Where *Mass Effect* stepped out of the shadows and became an epitome of choice-driven narrative games was its execution of a standard science-fiction plot. BioWare presented to its audience a unique interpretation of the worlds surrounding the Earth, filled with engaging characters and hours of hidden, interactive content. Regardless of whether one values play over story, *Mass Effect* is able to provide players with both, but the ludology, admittedly, leaves something to be desired: “the game isn’t perfect by any means. In fact, it’s surprising that so many small annoyances and glitches made their way into a game of such general high quality” (VanOrd 2007). Some critics observed the disorganized series of in-game menus, clunky third-person combat, and imperfect enemy artificial intelligence, which are all legitimate drawbacks from the game. However, the majority of people who played it understood that the developer’s focus was not on creating an innovative third-person shooter game. They recognized the game’s strength as one of the most important interactive narrative experiences of the decade.

While *Mass Effect 2* and *3* would go on to receive similar levels of commendation, the latest game has received sharp criticisms for what many consider an abandonment from what made the original trilogy so respected. After five years of hype and development, *Mass Effect: Andromeda* was released in 2017 to less-than-stellar reception. Though its changes to the combat system were well-received, “without

⁷ *Mass Effect* is my all-time favorite game series, with the first entry being my particular favorite. I wholeheartedly agree with this critic’s verdict.

consistently strong writing or a breakout star in its cast to carry it through the long hours and empty spaces, disappointments like a lack of new races, no companion customization, and major performance problems and bugs take their toll” (Stapleton 2017). The primary criticism toward *Andromeda* focused on technical issues, relating to the graphics and occasional in-game glitches. While these do draw away from the immersive experience games tend to create, *Andromeda*’s failings, in terms of this essay, stem from two places: its far too open worlds, and its haphazardly written story. Even with increased dynamics within play, without the story, and the organic relationship between the two, it failed. *Andromeda* attempted to expand on the explorative elements praised in the series’ earlier entries by including much more massive worlds for players to explore (BioWare 2017). However, because of this, rather than highly concentrated levels filled with content and attention to detail, the game’s zones became massive spaces filled with nothingness, which players had to cross to get from one objective to the next. This resulted in an increased amount of downtime during the game, something that developers usually tend to avoid in order to keep players attentive and occupied. Crossing the same patch of desert repeatedly in order to find a certain point-of-interest tends to become frustrating. *Andromeda* also attempted to introduce players to a new story set around terraforming planets for the Milky Way’s inhabitants, a new set of protagonists in the Ryder twins, and a new crew who will accompany you on your search for a new home, but:

Andromeda’s story problems stem more from delivery than from plot. The vast majority of Andromeda’s characters are just dull, and conversations rarely delve deeper than arduous ‘get to know you’ small talk. No one yells or cries or

expresses any measurable emotion at any point, even when they explicitly talk about their feelings, and there's no Tyrion Lannister or Francis Underwood to keep things interesting. There was plenty of room for Game of Thrones-style power struggles on the Nexus, yet all political disagreements are merely mentioned without being explored. Even romance options feel stilted, and the culminating scene I unlocked for successfully wooing a crew member was not as explicit or exciting as you might expect. (Butterworth 2017)

There are moments when the game's writing does shine through in a mature manner, but unfortunately, it is hidden beneath more heavy-handed and out-of-place dialogue. Lines like "What's the word on the street?" are uttered in an unironic fashion, by alien species living 600 years in the future. For a developer praised for its unparalleled storytelling abilities, BioWare somehow managed to miss the mark with *Andromeda*, so much so that the studio announced that, due to the harsh criticism and poor sales, "Mass Effect Andromeda will not receive any future single player updates," cancelling the previously-planned updates and calling into question the future of the franchise (Vulkk 2017). It is sad to imagine such a beloved series in purgatory, but due to a number of factors both in and out of their control, *Mass Effect: Andromeda* abandoned what made the games regarded so highly. Rather than follow the path previously laid out to them by their fans, BioWare both expanded and detracted elements in *Andromeda* beyond what was necessary. If the series is to be continued in the future, one can only hope BioWare will listen to its fan's feedback and critical reception and focus the franchise back on the interactive narrative, which is what made the series popular in the first place.

CONCLUSION

Mass Effect, pardon the pun, is a paragon of the necessity for audiences to interpret and interact with a text. Some games, as Bogost points out, are played in a straightforward, linear fashion, with players unable to do much other than progress forward through predetermined events. However, there is a distinct deviation between ludic-based and narrative-based games. Giving players the freedom of choice to interact with other characters, explore levels at their own leisure, and view the outcomes of their actions, expected or otherwise, enables the personal connections with the games that many people have experienced and cherish. The stories become the player's own. Reader-response criticism becomes the lens by which this new era of storytelling can be evaluated, which enables players to determine how their story unfolds and allows for "the meaning of the text [to come] alive in the reader's imagination" (Iser 1532). Games do not only act as an entertaining narrative or a series of challenges to overcome, but are instead transformed into an experiential, experimental, hypertextual story in which anyone can have an impact. That level of empowerment is severely lacking in other forms of media. If modern video games can provide this level of textual interaction and create a unique experience for the audience, then the future of video games as literature looks as open and bright as the worlds in which they take place.

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