

LUDONARRATIVE: QUEER EXPERIENCES, EMBODIED STORIES, AND PLAYFUL
REALITIES IN VIDEO GAMES

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ABSTRACT

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Narrative has been a central topic in game studies since the beginnings of the field, particularly in the foundational debates between narratology and ludology over whether or not games are narrative. Yet in the aftermath of those debates narrative has remained significantly limited to being a linear or at best multilinear form, and studies of narrative form in games rarely consider how its form is always affected by race, gender, sexuality, and other intersectional identities. This dissertation pushes these understandings further by proposing a new theory of narrative based on video games, play, and the lived, embodied experience of difference. Specifically, I argue that narrative is the variable and emergent process of organizing signs into sequences and patterns, in the process constructing unique (and possibly queer) realities.

Chapter one uses the popular queer indie game *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter* (The Astronauts 2014) as a case study in how narrative has become limited in games, particularly through the work of game studies scholars and toxic male gamers who claim that games with too much narrative are not real games. The rejection of narrative is imbricated with the marginalization of queer games, which often rely on narrative to represent queer experiences. In response to these problems, I turn to feminist, queer, and cognitive narrative theories to argue that narrative is an embodied and playful process that helps us construct and make sense of our different lived experiences.

Chapter two examines how narrative emerges and operates in *Pokémon Go* (Niantic 2016), especially in the context of LGBTQ gaming communities in the United States. I argue

that narrative in the game is much more than just the representations presented by the game; rather, narrative is the confluence of determined stories that developers design the game with, personal stories that players create as they play (and play differently), and larger collective and cultural stories that affect how players interact with each other and the game system.

Chapter three uses digital humanities tools for image analysis, specifically ImagePlot developed by the Software Studies Initiative at CUNY, to visualize variation and difference in players' playthroughs of games. ImagePlot allows us to see an entire playthrough of a game in one image, and by comparing images of playthroughs of the same game one can see where and how much variation is possible in that game. By doing so, ImagePlot effectively visualizes how adaptable the narrative form of a given game is, how different players experience the narrative differently, and even how narrative patterns can be used and innovated upon in future games.

Chapter four explores how the narrative processes laid out here are currently being used to create queer realities in popular queer games that limit queerness to experiences of loss, tragedy, and death. I argue that revealing the constrained narrative construction of these realities in existing games can contribute to imagining more inclusive, playful, and queer realities that recognize and create space for difference. In this sense, this dissertation reclaims narrative as a critical tool for social justice, and demonstrates how a reconsideration of form, embodied experience, and difference can help reshape our current realities.

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This dissertation is dedicated to everyone who has ever been told or made to feel that your experiences—your stories—do not matter or are not welcome. I hope what is written here can play some small role in building realities where our stories can flourish and be heard.

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Introduction: Too Narrative, Too Queer: The Border Wars of Game Studies

Video games, including the medium and the communities, industries, and studies that have grown up around it, have longstanding issues with exclusive and even violent practices. The most prominent example of this is #GamerGate, the harassment campaign targeting feminist scholars and developers that began in 2014 when a disgruntled man accused Zoë Quinn, his ex-girlfriend, of trading sex for favorable reviews and treatment for her game *Depression Quest* (Zoë Quinn 2013), a story-driven game addressing mental health. This narrative was quickly picked up by gamers who felt that women, persons of color, and queer folks were engaging in unethical deals with games journalists, leveraging personal connections and shady business exchanges to garner press coverage for their games with agendas of political correctness and social justice (Chess & Shaw 212). Of course such underhanded dealings were almost entirely fabricated conspiracies—Quinn’s relationship with a journalist started long after reviews of her games were published, and there is no evidence of any illicit dealings—yet the facts of the situation largely did not and do not matter. The narrative and rhetoric of ethics in game journalism provided a convenient cover for attacking the critics and developers whom gamers perceived as threatening the status quo in games by arguing for inclusive representation and new forms of games. Katherine Cross argues that this narrative that “someone, somewhere is going to take your games away” is a “terror dream,” an apocalyptic vision of the end of games that feature violence and center straight white men as protagonists (Cross). Yet because this fear could not express itself outright as the rejection of women, people of color, and LGBTQ folks in games, it morphed into a crusade against unethical games journalism, and the fact that crusade almost exclusively targeted these groups became an unfortunate coincidence. In this regard, the narrative of fear that drove #GamerGate is directly related to the fears of others that animate the

global rising tide of the alt-right, fascism, and white supremacy (Bezio 557). As Matt Lees argues, “This hashtag was the canary in the coalmine, and we ignored it” (Lees).

I begin with this brief vignette of #GamerGate and the recent political climate in and around games in order to highlight several crucial points about narrative. The first is that narratives matter because the narratives we have about games and the peoples who play them affect our realities of what games are and who gets to play and be represented in them. In other words, narrative shapes representation and can be used to either include more peoples and their stories, or, as with #GamerGate, exclude them. The second point is related to the first: narratives are always connected to identity, positionality, and power, which means they are always tied to race, gender, sexuality, and other systems of power. The inception of #GamerGate was an aggrieved man telling a story about a woman, and the resulting harassment was gendered, sexualized, and racialized in order to keep specific peoples outside of games. Finally, #GamerGate reveals how cultural narratives do not emerge suddenly or from nowhere, but rather are the result of multivalent discourses that collide and evolve to make sense of particular systems and lived experiences. As Lisa Nakamura writes, “GamerGate, [...] is part of a much longer history of sexual harassment of women in gaming. Its eruption into the news in 2014 only made this glaringly visible to the non-gamer world” (“Putting Our Hearts Into It” 35). #GamerGate emerged from the gendering of gaming and technology as masculine hobbies in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the reactionary backlash against identity politics, political correctness, and social justice in the 2000s and 2010s, and growing calls for better representation and inclusion in games in the early 2010s. The harassment campaign played on the anxieties generated by these trends and their related cultural shifts, bringing them together and weaponizing them against perceived others who needed to be resisted and repelled in order to

keep games as they were, itself an idealized narrative that has never reflected the diverse peoples who have always played and made games (Kocurek xii; Ruberg 1). In all of these ways, narrative emerges as a central concern in accounting for where video games and their cultures are now, how we got here, and perhaps how we can fight for more socially just futures.

Beyond structuring discourse about games and gaming cultures, narrative itself has been a contentious topic in video games since their emergence in the 1970s and 1980s, and has been used in recent debates as a defining point in what is or is not a game. *Gone Home* (The Fullbright Company 2013), a queer indie video game released the year before #GamerGate began, exemplifies this, and demonstrates how the issues central to the harassment campaign started well before they were tied to hashtag. *Gone Home* places the player in the shoes of Katie Greenbriar, a 21-year-old college student returning home from studying abroad to find her family missing and their house empty. The gameplay utilizes a first-person perspective and consists of exploring the house and uncovering clues in various objects and texts, interpreting and linking them together into narratives about your mother, who has an emotional affair with a coworker, your father, who comes to terms with his failing writing career, and your sister Sam, who struggles to fit in at school and falls in love with a classmate, Yolanda “Lonnie” DeSoto. The game eschews the combat and puzzle mechanics common to first-person shooter games, instead emphasizing an affective experience of discovering and relating to characters through the traces of themselves they left behind. In short, *Gone Home*’s focus is on narrative, particularly on using narrative to represent a queer romance that likely would not appear—and certainly not as a central story—in a mainstream game.

The differing responses of critics and players to *Gone Home* reveal prominent, intersecting tensions around narrative in gaming cultures, and directly forecast the emergence of

#GamerGate a year later. According to the reviews counted on Metacritic, a website that aggregates reviews of media, critical response to the game is overwhelmingly positive: forty-nine critics rate the game positively, with seven mixed reviews and zero negative ones. Player reviews, however, are far more mixed overall, with many more negative reviews—to date, 890 are positive, 372 are mixed, and 840 are negative (“Gone Home for PC Reviews”). While the reviews are dated on Metacritic, allowing some accounting for when they were posted and how public perception of the game shifted over time, it is difficult to see the overall trends in positive, negative, and mixed responses to the game since its release in 2013. What the numbers already demonstrate is a significant disconnect between what critics and players had to say about the game. It is disconnects like this one that gamers looked to as evidence for the supposed conspiracy of elite liberal critics and journalists pushing a progressive agenda in games by overhyping games with diverse representation.

These trends come into clearer focus on Steam, the digital distribution platform run by Valve Corporation on PC, Mac, and Linux that facilitates purchasing and playing video games, including indie games like *Gone Home* that often do not appear on store shelves. In response to “review bombing,” an increasingly popular strategy for attempting to destroy a product’s sales and popularity by quickly posting massive amounts of negative reviews for it, Valve implemented new visualizations of games’ reviews that allow users to see when positive and negative reviews of a game were posted (Klepek).¹ The questionable logic behind the feature is

¹ While review bombing is not exclusively used by reactionary consumers, it is a tactic commonly used by groups like #GamerGate to attack products that are perceived as too progressive or liberal, or ones that promote a “social justice warrior” agenda (Massanari & Chess). For example, *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (2017) was review-bombed for its feminist themes and diverse cast (Alexander). As Ben Kuchera notes, review bombs are often used by consumers who feel like it is the only way to get a company’s attention (Kuchera).

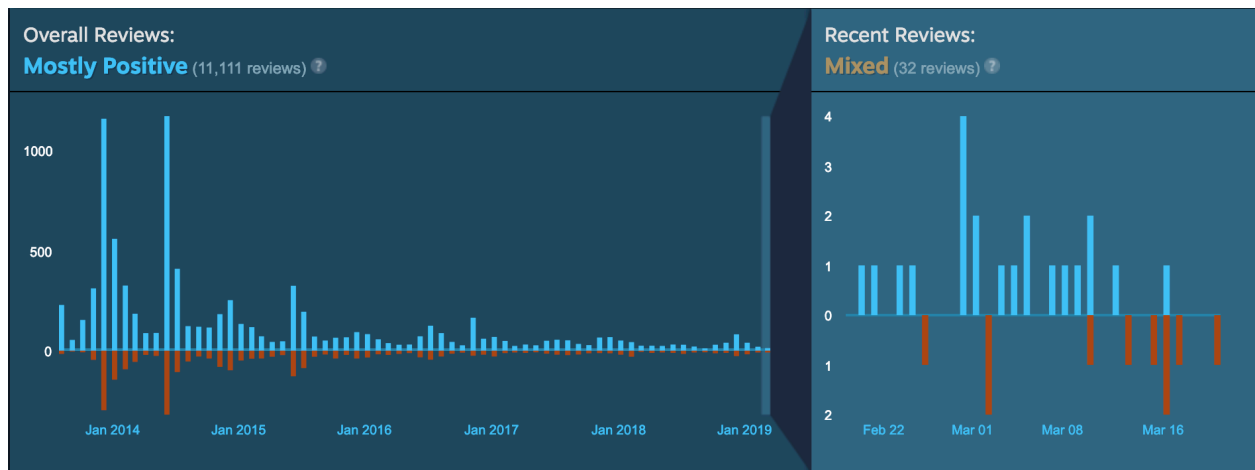


Figure 1. Visualization of *Gone Home* reviews on Steam since its release in 2013. The blue bars above zero are positive reviews, and the red bars beneath it are negative ones.

that it empowers users by helping them discern whether or not a review was part of a review bomb, but it does visualize the broad trends in positive and negative reviews of *Gone Home* (Figure 1). The visualization of *Gone Home*'s reviews reveals that both positive and negative reviews of the game spiked twice since its release, once during the holiday season in 2013 within a few months of the game's launch and again in summer and fall of 2014, roughly corresponding to the beginning of #GamerGate. Based on the chart, it does not appear that *Gone Home* was extensively review-bombed, but it received significant attention during the events surrounding the launch of #GamerGate's targeted harassment campaign. To understand why, one needs to examine the content of the reviews and what people were saying about the game at the time.

In closely examining the negative reviews of *Gone Home*, two major themes emerge. The first is that *Gone Home* is a bad game because it is too narrative, which to many players meant that the game is not a game at all. To give just a handful of the many examples, one player comments "this is not a game. There is literally no gameplay here," another writes "Arguably not even a game at all. All you do is walk around while listening to your lesbian sister whine about her first-world problems," and still another says "In short, this is NOT a game. This is not worth

20 bucks, this is not even worth 2 bucks. It's an interactive walk and pick up simulator" ("Gone Home for PC Reviews").² The reference to the game as an "interactive walk and pick up simulator" is a version of the term walking simulator, which was originally a pejorative for games like *Gone Home* that gamers argued are not real games because they forego combat and challenge in favor of narrative—they are just simulators for walking.³ Melissa Kagan notes that this dismissal of walking simulators is inherently gendered in that it privileges exploration based on combat and domination that is coded masculine while devaluing nonviolent exploration based on story and affect that is coded feminine (278).

Despite the fact that *Gone Home* utilizes many of the same actions and mechanics of other games, such as navigating a play space, interacting with objects, using clues to advance, and choosing nonlinear paths, many gamers view the game's lack of combat, death, and failure as a lack of gameplay. While one can easily chalk this up to mismatched definitions and expectations, the vitriolic response these gamers have for games that prioritize storytelling suggests there is a bigger problem with narrative at work here. It is not just that narrative play—putting together a story as the primary gameplay—is not real play, it is perceived as a threat to real play. To put this in terms of the terror dream Cross identifies, if narrative games like *Gone Home* are successful then they could change the dominant trends and forms of games, and for many gamers that cannot be allowed to happen. The narrative focus of *Gone Home* poses an additional threat because of what is represented in the narrative, namely Sam's romance with

² Lest it be said that I am cherry-picking reviews, the vast majority of negative reviews comment on the game's narrative focus as making it less of a game, or not a game at all. See <https://www.metacritic.com/game/pc/gone-home/user-reviews>.

³ The term walking simulator has for the most part been reclaimed by the genre, and for players that enjoy such games is no longer a pejorative despite its continued use as such by some gamers. See Kill Screen Staff, "Is It Time to Stop Using the Term 'Walking Simulator.'"

Lonnie. Many of the negative reviews of the game tie its narrative emphasis and non-game status to a liberal agenda to promote LGBTQ representation. For example, one gamer describes the game as “just a [sic] incredibly short and shallow attempt of the ‘interactive movie experience’ with it’s [sic] only real selling point being that it’s ‘PROGRESSIVE’” (“Gone Home for PC Reviews”). The entry for *Gone Home* on Encyclopedia Dramatica, a trolling website that parodies Wikipedia and mocks perceived social justice warrior culture, claims that the game is “a full-on architectural simulator [...] wherein you control Kaitlin Greenbriar who will unravel the uninteresting history of her lesbian sister who decided to bail on her military duty in order to scissor with her dyke friend” underneath a large flashing message that says “THIS IS NOT A GAME” (“Gone Home”). The point of a trolling post like this one is to offend, and to that end it is undoubtedly exaggerated to some extent. Yet the entry expresses the same sentiments and arguments as many of the negative reviews of the game, indicating it is part of the same reactionary move in gaming cultures to resist both narrative and queerness.

Thus while *Gone Home* is a bad game because it is too narrative, it is also a bad game because it is too queer. Outside of the deliberately offensive posts like the one above, this rarely expresses itself as outright hatred or malice toward queer characters, stories, and content. Rather, the queer romance in *Gone Home* is frequently referred to in dismissive terms such as “a poorly narrated coming out story” or “a craptastic story hidden under the veil of love and relationship which is in reality nothing but a lesbian teenager’s senseless decision about life” (“Gone Home for PC Reviews”). To directly say that queerness is bad would of course be blatant homophobia, so the reviews often turn instead to arguing that queer narratives are boring, uninteresting, or bad narratives, couching the anti-queerness in comments about form and craft. A similar rhetorical sleight of hand is the claim that the game’s queer narrative is merely an attempt to “push the

politically correct agenda,” making the game a “feminist, ‘check your privilege’ type of game” that gets praise only for its “homosexual subject matter” (“Gone Home for PC Reviews”). The supposed problem here is not that *Gone Home* is queer, rather the problem is that *Gone Home* is queer in service of an agenda. It remains unclear what type of queer representation would not be part of this perceived agenda, but presumably all queer representation is politically motivated and therefore unacceptable. Indeed, other reviews are explicit about *Gone Home*’s ideological threat to gender norms, warning that it is “Not for consumption by males!” and suitable only if “the player is a twelve year old girl” (“Gone Home for PC Reviews”). In each case, queerness is framed as a scheming outsider invading games in order to change them and challenge the masculine, heteronormative status quo. Guilty as charged, I suppose.

The content of the *Gone Home* reviews demonstrates that the game received increased attention and ire during the start of #GamerGate because by being too narrative and too queer it represented the intersection of two interrelated threats to hegemonic gaming cultures. The point of dwelling on the reviews here is not simply to say that they are wrong, misguided, or bigoted, or that one cannot post a negative review of a queer game. Rather, these negative reviews highlight the ongoing values and assumptions that structure what gets to count as a game and whose stories get included or excluded in the process. Walking simulator games like *Gone Home* that emphasize narrative and diverse representation have flourished since 2013, evident in similar games like *Firewatch* (Campo Santo 2016), *Virginia* (Variable State 2016), and *What Remains of Edith Finch* (Giant Sparrow 2017), but the tension around them remains. This is nowhere more evident than in Ian Bogost’s controversial article “Video Games Are Better Without Stories,” published in *The Atlantic* in 2017. In it, Bogost uses *What Remains of Edith Finch* to argue that narrative games are merely suffering from novel and film envy, which is an

issue because “the best interactive stories are still worse than even middling books and films. That’s a problem to be ignored rather than solved. Games’ obsession with story obscures more ambitious goals anyway” (Bogost). For Bogost, the “more ambitious goals” that games should aspire to are creating simulations of systems that allow players to take the “tidy, ordinary world apart and put it back together again in surprising, ghastly new ways.”

Bogost’s argument ignores how narrative can be used to the very ends he prioritizes, as evidenced in the many forms of contemporary narrative such as speculative fiction that emphasize defamiliarizing the worlds around us and building new ones. It is true that other narrative media rarely give readers and audiences the same degree of influence over the outcome of the story as games do for players, but this speaks to the unique power of games to use narrative in variable configurations to imagine and realize new realities. By devaluing stories in favor of simulations that supposedly do not have them, Bogost furthers the pernicious reasoning of the *Gone Home* reviews that narrative play is not real play and that it gets in the way of what makes a real game—the power to take apart and reassemble a world as you wish. To engage in narrative is “refusing the player agency,” and in gaming cultures that prize mastery, control, and power, that makes for bad games and bad narratives. Yet it is precisely these values that games that are too narrative and too queer challenge, and such challenges are sorely needed in a medium dominated by toxic masculinity and heterosexism.

The response to Bogost’s article was swift and many scholars and critics noted the exclusionary elements of his argument. In a blog for the game development and culture news site *Gamasutra*, Tom Battey points out the problematic nature of attempting to hierarchize different storytelling media: “Good and bad writing, perhaps. But good and bad *types* of story? Good and bad *ways* of telling stories? It’s an insidious idea of ‘worthiness’, that some types of story are

worth serious consideration while others are not based on some arbitrary content definition” (Battey). Feminist game studies scholars Bianca Batti and Alisha Karabinus similarly highlight the gendered “male power fantasy” inherent in “believing oneself to be the judge of what is good and right in games, what makes certain games better than others. It’s the kind of thing that results in [...] gatekeeping in games studies—not just whose games get to count as games, but whose study of them then gets to count as legitimate and valid as well” (Batti and Karabinus). The central issue with “Video Games Are Better Without Stories” and similar arguments, then, is that they privilege particular ways of making, playing, and analyzing games at the expense of others. Of course to some extent all creative and theoretical projects have to exclude in order to maintain definition—the focus of a field or a study is on this set of things here, and less so on those things over there. Yet when the epistemological boundaries that define a project are set so strictly that they deny the worth or even the possibility of other perspectives, then the knowledge produced by that project inevitably enacts an exclusionary violence. In other words, the ways we define games and game studies always involve power and have political consequences, especially when they take the form of value judgments that delineate good and bad, legitimate and illegitimate, worthwhile and worthless.

Writing narrative off and dismissing narrative games as not real games has significant consequences for social justice because it implies that stories—including and especially stories of marginalized and excluded experiences—are less valuable than the mastery of mechanics, rules, and strategies. In practice, this often means that the skills of aiming weapons and controlling cities are prioritized over the “skill of giving a shit about other people,” and the narrative elements and representations of different characters in a game become secondary, ancillary, and even unnecessary (Batti and Karabinus). For example, in her exploration of *NBA*

2K16 (Visual Concepts 2015), TreaAndrea Russworm notes that the basketball game was heavily criticized as a “broken game” for its inclusion of a story mode titled *Livin’ Da Dream* directed by Spike Lee that presents the narrative of a rising star from an African American family in Harlem, New York (Russworm). Many of the complaints about the game followed the same lines as those about *Gone Home*, namely that *NBA 2K16* is a game and a narrative does not belong there. Yet the narrative of the game is also what provides representation of and commentary on race and class, and to argue that it has no place in a good game effectively silences experiences of these systems in the medium. In this sense, devaluing narrative in games often means excluding marginalized peoples and their stories, suggesting in the process that they do not matter and what really matters is supposedly neutral and context-free gameplay. As Adrienne Shaw argues, this has the pernicious effect of constraining representation and thereby limiting who can be and see themselves in gaming cultures (*Gaming at the Edge* 230). Beyond furthering the marginalization and exclusion of peoples and their stories in games, the stigmatizing of narrative also hampers game studies’ ability to analyze and account for games by minimizing the sociocultural contexts in which play takes place.

Unfortunately rather than challenging the anti-narrative trends exemplified in the *Gone Home* reviews or Bogost’s article, game studies has often contributed to them. One of the foundational—and now infamous—debates in game studies was that between the camps of “ludology” and “narratology” over whether or not games are narrative, which Battey aptly summarizes:

For anyone lucky enough not to be familiar with the 'ludology vs. narratology debate', it involved a particularly tedious period in games academia where academics on various sides of the debate argued about the merits of the videogame as a storytelling device

versus the videogame as a mechanical expression of play. [...] The 'debate', if it even was such, contributed very little of any worth to either academia or the games industry, and pretty much everyone forgot about it and got on with more interesting and productive undertakings, like actually making videogames. (Battey)

Alas, Battey overstates the case somewhat in claiming “everyone forgot about it,” evident in its repeated resurrection in both popular and scholarly discourse about games. A major reason the debate continues to return is that it defined game studies as a field opposed and resistant to others such as literary and film studies, and thereby limited opportunities for exploring and theorizing the relationship between narrative in games and other media. Ludologist scholars such as Espen Aarseth and Markku Eskelinen repeatedly framed the debate as a fight against other fields “colonizing” game studies in a disciplinary “land rush” or “stake-claiming,” and instead advocated for a “division of scholarly labor” that kept narrative safely locked away in literature and other media where it belongs (Aarseth “Genre Trouble” 45; Eskelinen 101). This attempt to distinguish games from other media and spaces with colonizing rhetoric even appears in the work of scholars on the opposing side of the debate or outside of it altogether, such as when Janet Murray discusses games as not being the “enemy of the book,” when Miguel Sicart writes of play “occupying” non-play spaces, or when McKenzie Wark argues that games have “colonized reality” (Murray 8; Sicart 28; Wark 8). Co-opting the language of colonization to describe the study of video games as a besieged enterprise has pernicious implications, not the least of which is potentially redirecting “white anxiety by concealing colonization” in digital media, as Lisa Nakamura documents extensively in representation in games (“Cybertyping” 317). In terms of game narrative, the debate between narratology and ludology structured the

field in oppositional terms such that narrative is an outsider, an “extraneous element” to be imported into games or held at the border depending on one’s stance (Mukherjee 6).

A second, related reason the debate keeps coming back is that it got mired in deciding whether or not games are narrative, and never produced a theory of narrative based on games or a methodology for studying narrative in games. This is not to say that there has not been work on narrative in games, or that scholars have not proposed narrative concepts that are useful for analyzing game narrative. Indeed, as Hartmut Koenitz notes, a survey of publications on narrative in games reveals a wide variety of meanings and tools for narrative, and scholars such as Marie-Laure Ryan, Tamer Thabet, Souvik Mukherjee, and Weimin Toh have explored theories of immersion, interactivity, play, and multimodality related to game narrative. Essential as these studies are, they all rely on taking conceptions of narrative developed for other media and modifying and applying them to games, and they rarely consider how that exchange might go the other way as well, with games generating new theories and definitions of narrative. For example, despite much scholarship on game narrative, the dominant definition of narrative used in game studies is still drawn from classical narrative theories based on literature, and views narrative as a “static essence,” a “fixed series” or “forced succession of events” (Frasca 86; Aarseth *Cybertext* 95). Existing work has done little to challenge this understanding of narrative, and as a result the boundary between narrative and game established by the debate between narratology and ludology remains largely intact.

Without a theory of narrative based on games, the narratology/ludology debate continues to reverberate in game studies and narrative remains an axis of exclusion in gaming cultures. Games like *Gone Home* and *NBA 2K16* that are too narrative are still criticized as bad or fake games, and the stories of marginalized peoples that they tell are thus further minimized and

excluded. The problem also works in reverse—just as games that are too narrative are not games, games that are too playful are not recognized as narrative, and this devalues narrative modes of playing and relating to games. For example, Janet Murray interprets *Tetris* (Pajitnov 1984) as telling the story of an “opponent-battling or environment-battling hero,” wherein the player is engaging in a “symbolic drama” that is an analogy for the bustling lives of the 1990s (“From Game-Story to Cyberdrama” 2; *Hamlet* 142). While one certainly does not need to agree with this interpretation of *Tetris*, other game studies scholars have dismissed it outright as ridiculous: Aarseth writes that it is an “intellectual waste of time” to find a story in the game, and Nick Montfort argues that it has “no meaningful narrative dimension” (Aarseth “Quest Games as Post-Narrative Discourse” 365; Montfort 183). The categorical rejection of narrative in some games can be just as exclusive as the categorical rejection of other games for their narrative content. Both prioritize particular types of games and play as authentic and worthwhile at the expense of other ways of experiencing games, and both arbitrarily limit the capacity for game studies and narrative theory to account for different forms of games.

In response to these ongoing issues in gaming cultures and game studies, this dissertation proposes a new theory of narrative as an embodied cognitive process that playfully constructs realities in video games and beyond. It does so by focusing in on the games like *Gone Home* that have hereto been excluded for being too narrative and too queer—games such as *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter* (The Astronauts 2014), *P.T.* (Kojima Productions 2014), and *Fragments of Him* (Sassybot 2016) that emphasize story, emotion, and exploration rather than combat and competition. These games provide new ways of experiencing narrative in virtual spaces that demand new conceptions of what narrative is and how it operates. At the same time, as Brendan Keogh points out, they “provide the most fruitful challenges to traditional and normalized

understandings of what videogames are and how they are experienced” (Keogh 16). By rethinking both what counts as a narrative and what counts as a game, this narrative theory aims to punch through the boundaries between concepts and fields that have limited who gets to play and study games (and how) for too long.

Queer games and narrative theories are central to this project for several reasons. First, they provide a framework for transgressing the borders of game and narrative, a potential Shaw observes: “queerness, as a mode of boundary questioning and structural critique, is particularly suited to pushing back on assumptions that any medium or genre can or should be or mean just one thing” (Shaw “What isn’t a Game?”). Queer games are already blurring the distinction between narrative and play, and queer narrative theories highlight and deconstruct understandings of narrative as a linear structure with normative, fixed, and reproductive teleologies. Second, they imagine forms of playing, telling stories, and constructing realities that pose a challenge to heteronormative gaming cultures that idealize mastery, domination, and violence. Queer games show us the queer elements of video games and narrative, and point to how we can use them to find new ways of organizing and experiencing the world that “disturb the order of things” (Ahmed 161). Finally, I focus on queer games and narratives in order to center the voices, perspectives, and lived experiences of LGBTQ folks who continue to be pushed to the margins of games, or out of games altogether. Of course gender and sexuality are but two of many axes of exclusion in gaming cultures, and throughout these case studies I utilize an intersectional lens based in the work of women of color feminists such as Kimberlé Crenshaw and Audre Lorde to highlight the imbricated systems of gender, sexuality, race, class, and disability. In doing so, I follow in the footsteps of intersectional queer and feminist games scholars including Adrienne Shaw, Kishonna Gray, TreaAndrea Russworm, Bonnie Ruberg, Lisa

Nakamura, Edmond Chang, Gabriela T. Richard, and many others. My goal is not just to explain how narrative operates in games, but also to highlight how it works differently for different players and how it can contribute to building more transformative and socially just futures.

This dissertation further draws on cognitive humanities and cognitive narrative theories to explore how narrative functions as an embodied mental process that organizes player experiences and constructs realities in games. Studies of game narrative have almost exclusively focused on narrative as a formal element within games without considering the roles of the player's body and cognition as fundamental aspects "of understanding, of reading, of *perceiving*" narrative (Keogh 5). Similarly, as Sue Kim notes, cognitive studies have rarely acknowledged how social and cultural power acts on bodies and affects cognitive processes, and have instead ignored race, gender, and sexuality in favor of pursuing supposed "cognitive universals" (Kim). By addressing how the player's body interacts with the game system and shapes how they use narrative to interpret and play in a game's reality, this narrative theory contributes to addressing these shortcomings in both fields. Narrative is produced and processed by different bodies in different positions in systems of power, and the variable form of narrative in games presents a unique opportunity to recognize and account for these differences.

Chapter one uses the popular queer indie game *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter* as a case study in how narrative operates in games, particularly how it relies on player interaction with game systems, the embodied cognitive process of interpreting and linking signs together into narratives, and sociocultural contexts of gender, sexuality, race, and other intersecting identities. To develop a theory of narrative capable of addressing these elements of game narrative, I begin by building a definition of narrative using the concepts of narrative events, levels, and sequences drawn from classical narrative theories in literature and film. Next, I modify the definition and

adapt it for games through an exploration of semiotic and deconstructive play in the work of Derrida and recent critical semioticians such as Gary Genosko. Finally, I turn to current feminist, queer, and cognitive narrative theories to show how the playful construction of narrative is embodied and contextual, and used to make sense of our different lived experiences and realities.

Chapter two continues to develop the theory of the narrative construction of reality by examining how narrative emerges and operates in *Pokémon Go* (Niantic 2016), an augmented reality game that requires players to explore and interact with the actual world around them. I argue that narrative in the game is much more than just the representations presented by the game; rather, narrative is the confluence of determined stories that developers design the game with, personal stories that players create as they play (and play differently), and larger collective and cultural stories that affect how players interact with each other and the game system. Game narrative, then, involves the constant collision and melding of different narratives.

Chapter three uses digital humanities tools for image analysis, specifically ImagePlot developed by the Software Studies Initiative at CUNY, to visualize variation and difference in players' playthroughs of *P.T.*, a first-person narrative game similar to *Gone Home*. ImagePlot allows us to see an entire playthrough of a game in one image, and by comparing images of playthroughs of the same game one can see where and how much variation is possible in that game. ImagePlot effectively visualizes how adaptable the narrative form of a given game is, how different players experience and construct narrative differently, and how narrative patterns can be used and innovated upon in future games.

Chapter four explores how the narrative processes laid out here are currently being used to create queer realities in games, and how mainstream queer indie games limit those realities to experiences of hardship, loss, and tragedy. Through close analysis of popular queer games such

as *Gone Home*, *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter*, and *Fragments of Him*, I demonstrate how such games constrain the narrative possibilities of what it means to live and play as a queer person in order to appeal to heteronormative audiences in ways that are familiar, relatable, and non-threatening, essentially keeping queerness sequestered at arm's length. By revealing these boundaries to the narrative construction of realities in existing games, I argue we can contribute to imagining more inclusive, playful, and queer realities that recognize and respect difference.

This theory reclaims narrative as a tool for more than just making exciting and marketable games, and demonstrates why narrative should be more than an unnecessary or optional afterthought in the medium. That understanding of narrative—as the opposite, the outsider, the invader of games—has caused too much harm in gaming cultures and game studies, and it continues to exclude marginalized peoples and their stories and limit our understanding of what games are and how they operate. Instead, video games can reveal how we use narrative playfully throughout our experiences with games and other texts, and can further help us understand how we do so differently. They allow us to put narrative into play and to better recognize play in narrative because they were never separate to begin with. Narrative in games and elsewhere is a process that makes meaning and constructs our realities, a process that we can use to imagine and play with new worlds and ways of being that are emergent, variable, and even queer. And that is ultimately what this theory of narrative in games offers: queer narrative, queer play.

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Chapter 1
“You made me real”: Narrative, Play, and Queer Realities

“Stories. Stories. Always with the stories.” —Travis Carter, The Vanishing of Ethan Carter

As contentious as the debate about whether games are (or should be) narrative has been, games that tell stories are everywhere these days, and they are both immensely popular and critically acclaimed. A brief scan of Game of the Year lists of the past several decades reveals games such as *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (Nintendo EAD 1998), *BioShock* (Irrational Games 2007), and *God of War* (SIE Santa Monica Studio 2018), all of which rely on narrative to establish their realities and follow characters on adventures with recognizable beginnings, middles, and ends.⁴ Even multiplayer arena games that emphasize combat and gameplay, such as *League of Legends* (Riot Games 2007) and *Overwatch* (Blizzard Entertainment 2016), have heavily invested in both in-game and transmedia storytelling to provide motivation and progression to their worlds (Farough). Of course each of these games uses narrative somewhat differently—just as different novels or films do—and in order to assess how narrative constructs realities in games it is necessary to focus in on particular examples. Walking simulator games such as *Gone Home* are particularly generative in this regard. In addition to being central figures in recent experimentation with narrative in games, as seen in Hartmut Koenitz’s argument that they constitute the “next step in the evolution of narrative” in the medium, walking simulators have a number of similarities to mainstream, AAA games

⁴ For a comprehensive list of Game of the Year awards granted by different publications and organizations, including active and defunct awards, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Game_of_the_Year_awards. The lists also demonstrate a strong bias towards games in the first-person shooter and action-adventure/action role-playing genres that may correspond to an over-representation of narrative games, but this nevertheless demonstrates that games that emphasize narrative are often more popular than those that do not.

(“Beyond ‘Walking Simulators’”).⁵ For example, walking simulators are similar to first-person shooters such as the Halo or Call of Duty games in that they use the same first-person camera, player controls, and mechanics for interacting with the game environment, with the exception of lacking weapons and combat systems. This means that an exploration of narrative forms and structures in walking simulators can translate readily to player experiences in other games and genres.

In particular, *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter* (The Astronauts 2014) is essentially a game about stories, and this makes it an excellent case study in how narrative operates in video games and other interactive media. *Vanishing* tells the story of Ethan Carter, a 12-year-old boy living in Red Creek Valley, Wisconsin with his family. The Carter family are the caretakers of the valley and the Vandergriff estate, including an abandoned, dilapidated mansion, dam, and mine that are familiar figures in small town life in rustbelt America. Each member of the Carter family finds a different way to attempt to escape Red Creek Valley—for example, Edwin “Ed” Carter, Ethan’s grandfather, turns to alcohol; Dale Carter, Ethan’s father, turns to designing new inventions (all failures); and Ethan himself turns to reading popular genre fiction and writing his own stories that imagine worlds beyond the valley. It is Ethan’s tendency to daydream and get lost in his stories that puts him at odds with the rest of his working class family, who see fiction as a waste of time. The events of the game begin with Ethan’s disappearance, and the player plays as Paul Prospero, a paranormal detective who comes to the valley after receiving a letter from Ethan requesting his help.

⁵ AAA games are games made by large game development studios with many resources, such as Electronic Arts or Nintendo, and are often the most popular and financially successful games. In this regard, AAA games are in many ways analogous to blockbuster films.

Beyond its topical focus on storytelling, *Vanishing* models several key points about narrative in games. The first is the most apparent, and has been well-documented in games since the Multi-User Dungeon (MUD) text-based games of the 1970s and 80s: games tell stories through play, and rely on the player's interactions with the game system that often involve making choices and exploring different possible narratives (Aarseth *Cybertext* 145). As Souvik Mukherjee puts it, in games it is as though "You, the player (or reader, one could say), are suddenly thrown into someone else's story and are expected to continue the tale" (1). This reliance on the player's actions and the possibility for variation in a game's story has led many scholars to claim that the distinguishing feature of narrative in new media is its interactivity (Murray 74; Montfort 3; Ryan *Narrative as Virtual Reality* 6; to name only a few), and others to claim that the interaction and nonlinearity in a medium like games means they are not narrative at all (Aarseth "Genre Trouble" 45; Frasca 86; Eskelinen 212). However in recent years scholars such as Hanna-Riika Roine and Souvik Mukherjee have increasingly challenged the assumption that narrative in media such as games, electronic literature, and hypertext is interactive whereas narrative in older media such as novels, films, and television is not. For example, Roine argues that all stories across media are interactive "in the very elementary sense that no story exists unless there is someone to receive it. Concepts such as 'interactive narrative,' then, are devoid of meaning" (71). Mukherjee goes even further, arguing that stories in games are not just similarly interactive to those in other media, they also provide a new way of understanding how narrative is always interactive and playful in its various forms: games "illustrate how the ludic is intrinsic to the conceptions of the narrative and vice versa. [...] The novel has also always been a ludic form, as all the examples ranging from an eighteenth-century text like *Tristram Shandy* to modern texts by Borges and Calvino show" (212). In the light of these arguments, a game like

Vanishing reveals how narrative in games is interactive and requires particular actions from the player, similar to both physical actions (turning pages, selecting scenes, or moving eyes) and conceptual or interpretative actions that take place in other media.

In *Vanishing*, this interactivity takes the form of gameplay that involves exploring Red Creek Valley, interacting with objects and characters, and uncovering what happened to Ethan. The moment the player starts the game, they are greeted with a rather ominous message: “This game is a narrative experience that does not hold your hand.” This statement is loaded in several regards, such as the privileging of difficulty, similar to Aarseth’s invocation of the “non-trivial” effort required from readers that distinguishes “ergodic” texts, or the seeming corresponding assertion that other narratives coddle or spoon-feed their audiences (*Cybertext* 1). Putting such considerations aside for the moment, the statement primes the player for the play they are about to engage in, indicating that it is up to them to piece together and interpret the narrative without any guarantee of aid from the game. As the player takes their first steps in the game, it quickly becomes apparent what this means. They are given no directive of where to go in the game, no objective beyond the fact of Ethan’s disappearance and his request for help, and no apparent tools or powers other than the ability to move around the game space. Throughout the game, their exploration of the valley and its abandoned buildings will lead them to encounters with objects like letters, diaries, and newspaper clippings, as well as the ghostly traces of Ethan and his family (Figure 2). Each document or scene is a small part of a larger narrative—a bit of narrative or a narreme—and contains clues that help the player discover what happened in a particular location, enter the various storyworlds Ethan created, or learn more about the histories of the Carter family and Red Creek Valley (Negut 26). Interacting with the clues triggers clips of narration, such as Paul Prospero’s comments on the case and cryptic musings like “Ethan knew

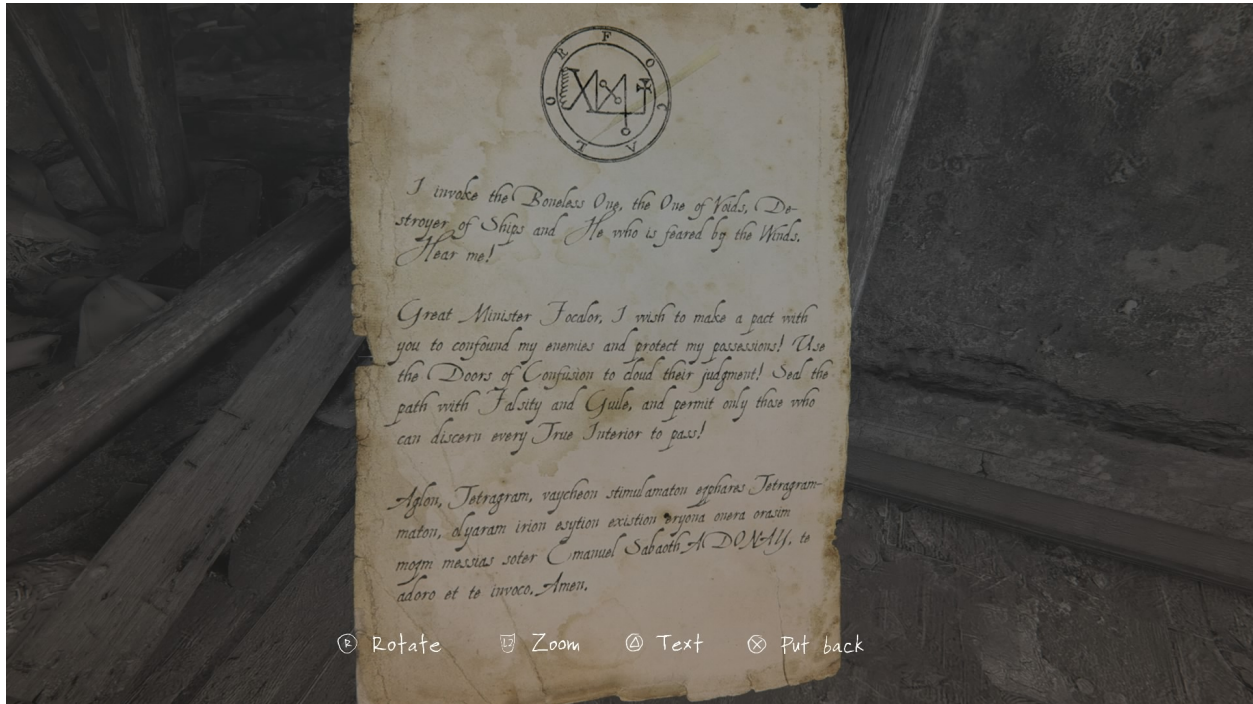


Figure 2. A document the player discovers in an abandoned house. This document is an invocation, a spell that begins one of Ethan's stories that the player must complete.

things that no little boy should know about.” In allowing the player to reassemble the game’s various narratives, the documents serve to orient them in the play space of the game by helping them make sense of it, and ultimately are the mechanism they use to reach the conclusion of the game’s narrative experience. *Vanishing*’s narratives are thus distributed throughout the game’s environment and are profoundly spatial as well as temporal, exemplifying what Henry Jenkins famously described as spatial stories and environmental storytelling in his foundational work, “Game Design as Narrative Architecture” (Jenkins). As Jenkins explains, games embed narratives in their play spaces and players activate them through play. While game developers often design play spaces to guide players to particular objects and encounters, the narrative is not fully determined, but rather is always in-process and emerges as the player navigates the play space. In that emergence there is always some possibility for variable and divergent outcomes, as different players interpret the narrative clues and move through the game differently.

Because narrative in games like *Vanishing* is not just a determined series of documents, objects, and encounters, but also the process of the player activating, interpreting, and linking them together, a theory of game narrative must account for both what a game presents to players and how players experience that content. In other words, *Vanishing* demonstrates how one cannot understand narrative solely through game content and forms, but rather must consider their dynamic relationship to the player, including the embodied cognitive and phenomenological processes that are constantly active throughout the play experience. Both the game and the player are essential and inseparable in a game, as Brendan Keogh argues, “Videogames are more than virtual content; they are embodied and materially instantiated by the player. This means that if we are concerned with the textual significance of specific videogames, the object of a textual study must be the circuit of technologies and audiovisual signifiers that constitutes and is constituted by the player’s body” (43). Even when the player is just walking through Red Creek Valley, without interacting with any clues, reading any text, or listening to narrative voiceovers, they are still engaging in narrative processes: they are searching for signs of Ethan and his family, anticipating where to go and what will happen next, and adjusting their sense of the story based on new information and events. For example, when the player reaches the dam in the game, they encounter a vista that shows them the abandoned buildings in the valley that the player infers as the next destinations for the narrative—the places where they will encounter new events to fit into their understanding of the story (Figure 3). The player is not reading any text, listening to any audio narration, or watching any cutscene at this point, but they are nevertheless being asked to think narratively as they navigate the game and project where the story will go. They are reading the play space, interpreting it, and using narrative to construct what Marie-Laure Ryan describes as a “cognitive map” of the game (*Narrating Space/Spatializing Narrative*



Figure 3. The view from the dam in Red Creek Valley. To the right is an abandoned home belonging to the Vandergriff family, and down below a hydroelectric plant and mine buildings are visible.

77). In essence, as the player plays and moves around Red Creek Valley, they are actively producing narratives, structuring and making sense of their experiences in order to make their next moves and progress in the game.

While *Vanishing*'s narrative reveals the need to break down the distinction between game content and forms and the player's embodied experiences and cognitive processes, it further challenges a longstanding trend in game studies to isolate narrative from play. Scholars such as Jesper Juul, Ian Bogost, and Alexander Galloway have distinguished between the more narrative and representational elements of games, such as non-interactive cutscenes that deliver necessary plot points to the player, and supposedly non-narrative play elements, such as fighting, scoring points, or simply moving around the play space (Juul 5-6; Bogost; Galloway 11-12). Even narrative scholars such as Richard Walsh posit that player actions in a game are by themselves simply mechanical behavior; they are "no more inherently narrative than our behavior in

negotiating everyday life” (Walsh 77). Yet, as the brief example of the dam in *Vanishing* demonstrates, the narrative does not cease when the player is not interacting with specific objects and events. The play—the motion, exploration, and activity of the player—is what connects all of the objects and events together, and is an essential part of the game’s narrative. Without its presence in the narrative, the experience would become almost nonsensical, consisting of solitary narrative moments with nothing linking them together. Thus if we are to account for narrative in *Vanishing* and other games, we have to look beyond the representations that the game provides, and also consider the player’s thoughts, feelings, and actions that interpret those representations and link them together into larger narratives. As Roth et al. argue, “To understand the complex relationship between interaction and narrative it is crucial to include a cognitive perspective in the analysis. This destabilizes the dichotomy between ‘ludo’ and ‘narrative’” (12).

Finally, the embodied interaction between player and game system that produces narrative throughout *Vanishing* does not happen in a “context-free vacuum,” but rather always takes place in a sociopolitical context and is imbued with cultural values that have profound implications for social justice (Page “Gender” 189). Specifically, *Vanishing* centers the fact that narrative is always gendered and tied to social and cultural power. As the player explores Red Creek Valley and enacts the stories that Ethan wrote and left behind, they discover that Ethan’s family views his stories and imaginative nature as a frivolous waste of time. His family members repeatedly (and dismissively) tell him that they will “read [his] story later,” and his mother leaves him a note to “stop living in your head. Do something real. That’s what people respond to—reality.” The family’s rejection of Ethan and his stories as obsessed with silly fantasies is particularly gendered throughout the game. For example, at one point the player finds Ethan’s copy of a pulp fiction magazine called *Abstruse Tales*, and across the cover Ethan’s brother

Travis has scrawled “GAYLORD!!!” Later, in the final moments of the game, the family discovers Ethan’s hideout where he writes his stories, to which his uncle says “you got a faggot for a son, Dale,” and Travis adds, “Faggot! Ethan you’re a fucking faggot!” At no point in the game does Ethan ever claim a gender or sexuality for himself, instead his family writes one onto him for his perceived failure to perform a masculine gender role.

For Ethan’s working class family, it is not just that narrative and imagining other worlds is viewed as unproductive, it is sentimental, emotional, and sensitive, incapable of dealing with reality. As noted earlier, Ethan’s use of stories to escape or cope with reality is hardly unique in his family. Ironically all of his male relatives seem similarly incapable of dealing with their realities—his grandfather drinks, his father invents, and his brother bullies. The difference is their activities are coded and understood as acceptably masculine, whereas Ethan’s stories are not. *Vanishing* thus points out how narrative is, as Robyn Warhol explains, culturally constructed as effeminate, and Ethan’s engagement in it is a failure to perform toxic masculinity that is not allowed to feel, dream, or be vulnerable (1, 9). In this failure to adhere to heterosexist gender roles, Ethan’s stories further demonstrate how storytelling can become a queer act by refusing to follow normative expectations and instead creating space for other experiences and ways of being. In Jack Halberstam’s terms, Ethan enacts a queer failure by telling stories and imagining other realities, and in doing so he “presents an opportunity rather than a dead end” (Halberstam 96).

The effeminate and queer nature of narrative in *Vanishing* is reflective of narrative’s position in gaming culture generally, where games that emphasize narrative and affective experiences are routinely written off as casual games, or not games at all. It is no coincidence that many of these games are feminist and queer games such as *Gone Home*, *Vanishing*, *What*

Remains of Edith Finch, or *Virginia* that use narrative to tell the stories of marginalized peoples. Whether intentionally or not, efforts to limit the significance of narrative in games and locate the essence of games in rules, mechanics, and idealized forms of play have often had the effect of further marginalizing players who are women, LGBTQ folks, and persons of color (Mukherjee 7-9; Keogh 16). How we define games and narratives has consequences, especially for who gets to play, whose stories get told, and who is welcome in gaming communities. In this context, to engage in and prioritize narrative in contemporary games is to take on a queer positionality that defies the privileging of competition, mastery, and dominance in popular mainstream games. To be clear, it is not that playing a game like *Vanishing* makes a player queer, or even gives them greater understanding or empathy for queer experiences.⁶ Rather, narrative is a gendered form, and the act of storytelling always has an embodied context and relationships to systems of sociocultural power. As Warhol argues with print literature, “we should think of narrative structures as devices that work through readers’ bodily feelings to produce and reproduce the physical fact of gendered subjectivity” (24). To play in and with narrative then holds the possibility for doing queer work, and for building realities that can challenge current culture and open spaces for alternatives.

So far *Vanishing* has provided three crucial considerations for game narrative: it involves interaction and play with game forms; it requires the player’s embodied cognitive processes; and it always takes place in a cultural context impacted by systems of power, such as gender, sexuality, race, and class. Yet in the study of narrative in games, no theory of narrative has

⁶ Many queer, feminist, and critical race studies scholars working on games and virtual reality have challenged the claim that such experiences create empathy for players. For example, see press coverage for Anna Anthropy’s satirical *Empathy Game* (D’Anastasio) or Lisa Nakamura’s recent work with empathy and virtual reality (Nakamura).

emerged that accounts for each of these elements in *Vanishing*. Indeed, there has not been much consensus on what narrative is, let alone what it is in video games: “A first analysis of ‘narrative’ in a range of academic publications concerned with video games during the last two decades uncovers a variety of different meanings” (Koenitz “What Game Narrative” 2). As Koenitz explains, scholars discussing narrative in games often assume that what narrative means is transparent, even as they theorize it as differently as a type of interaction, a cognitive process, a system of signs across media, or as a simple way to provide context and backstory, to name only a handful of possibilities (2). An accounting of how narrative operates in games should ideally be able to speak to many of these aspects of narrative, however past studies have overwhelmingly relied on definitions and theories of narrative drawn from classical narratology developed using primarily novels and film.⁷ This has often been explicitly motivated by a desire to distinguish video games from earlier media, as seen in Aarseth’s frequent argument that games do not fit classical definitions of narrative, therefore games are not narrative and require their own field of study (“Quest Games” 361). For example, Eskelinen draws on Gerald Prince’s definition of narrative as “the representation of real or fictive events by one or more narrators to one or more narratees” and further qualifies narrative as being “oriented towards narrative texts and not stories” in order to posit games are not narratives, and should rather be understood as systems of rules, mechanics, and play (111). Eskelinen’s distinction between stories and narrative texts—i.e., games are stories, not narratives—is a common one, mirrored in Jesper Juul’s insistence that games are fictions, not narratives, or Nick Montfort’s claim that games are simulations, not narratives (Juul 122; Montfort “Narrative and Digital Media” 172). In each case, classical

⁷ Narratology is a term coined by Tzvetan Todorov for the study and theory of narrative. As Gerald Prince describes it, “Narratology is the study of the form and functioning of narrative” (4).

narratology's inability to fully account for video game experiences is deployed as evidence that video games are not narrative, and this point is used as justification for the necessity of game studies as a field distinct from literary and film studies. Even attempts to theorize narrative outside of this disciplinary posturing, such as Eric Zimmerman's definition of narrative as a series of events that has representation, pattern, and repetition, rely almost exclusively on classical theories of narrative, without considering more recent developments in postclassical narratologies, to which I will return shortly (Zimmerman 156-157).

Thus while we have many attempts to adapt classical narrative definitions and theories to games, or to define games against them, we have yet to see a new theory of narrative based on games. For scholars who argue for limiting and excluding narrative's role in games, such a theory is unnecessary, and work in postclassical narrative theories such as cognitive approaches to narrative is irrelevant because it supposedly lacks a focus on formalist textual elements and is not "verifiable" (Eskelinen 114). Yet games continue to tell stories, and continuing to either minimize them on the one hand or shoehorn them into existing definitions on the other renders us incapable of either fully recognizing their current meanings or realizing their radical potential. As Brian McHale notes, developing a theory of narrative centered on games could have "radical knock-on consequences for the theorization of narrative," and lead us to think about narratives as "worlds to be immersed in and systems to be contemplated from without, and to reflect on how each experience, immersion, and interaction inflected the other" (297, 300). Marie-Laure Ryan in particular recognizes the need to rework narratology in light of new media forms, and has done more than any other scholar to do so in *Avatars of Story* and *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2*. Specifically, Ryan emphasizes several crucial dimensions of narrative in new media such as video games and virtual reality, including immersion and interactivity, which she proposes as

competing and interrelated elements of narrative texts (Ryan *Narrative as Virtual Reality* 26, 9). In Ryan's view, texts that are immersive create a world for a reader, spectator, or user to inhabit, and often utilize a "top-down, author-controlled narrative design," whereas texts that are interactive involve variable configurations of signs and events that give "the interactor a sense of freedom of action" (12). While Ryan argues that immersion and interactivity are in tension and are not easily reconciled, a game like *Vanishing* demonstrates that this is not always the case—it provides both an immersive world and interactive possibilities for the player. Building on Ryan's work, it is possible to develop a narratology based on the play experiences of games, a "game of narration" that pushes past binaries of narrative versus play or immersion versus interactivity that have defined game narrative to date (Ryan "Will New Media" 342).

The remainder of this chapter is devoted to developing such a narratology. A few considerations guide the task at hand. This theory of narrative does not seek to reinvent the wheel, or to engage in "radical relativism" by suggesting that games are so radically different from other media that their narratives have no overlaps or relationships to narratives in other media (Ryan "Introduction" 34). Rather, my goal is to develop a narrative theory that accounts for how games are shaping and changing narrative—not suddenly or completely, but by building on histories and contexts that connect them to other media. In order to do so, I explore existing classical and postclassical narratologies, finding useful parts and bringing them together for the analysis of games and play experiences. In this sense, my approach is what Werner Wolf has described as "neo-classical," blending elements of both classical and postclassical narratologies (59). I do not aim to taxonomize or to develop a grand schema of categories that puts each game and narrative in its place, as recent games ontology work has done, but instead to pursue the similar processes and elements that underpin narrative across many types of games, while also

recognizing how they function differently in different contexts (Aarseth and Grabarczyk).

Finally, the point of this narrative theory is not to ultimately solve the debate between narratology and ludology, or simply to say that games are narrative. For, as Mieke Bal astutely says, “the point of narratology is not to demonstrate the narrative nature of an object” (Bal 226). By focusing on the elements of narrative in their embodied, cognitive, and cultural contexts, we can instead see how narrative constructs realities in current games, and how we can use it to build better, queerer alternatives. Without further ado, let’s play!

Classical Narratology: Story/Discourse, Sequencing, Signs

While classical narratology has often been invoked in discourse on game narrative in order to argue games are not narrative, this also means it is a common foundation for studies of narrative in games, and a good place to start looking for concepts that help analyze a game like *Vanishing*. As Jan Christopher Meister explains, narratology has its origins in antiquity in Plato and Aristotle’s distinctions of different representational modes such as mimesis, “the direct imitation of speech in the form of the characters’ verbatim dialogues and monologues,” and diegesis, “which comprises all utterances attributable to the author” (Meister). From its origins, then, the study of narrative has attempted to distinguish the formal elements of narrative and their relationships to each other, an effort that can be traced through theorists of the novel in the 19th century to Russian formalism and French structuralism in the 20th (Puckett 16-18). Narratology become a formal study by that name in its initial or “classical” phase from the mid-1960s to the 1980s, a period when the structural study of narrative emerged from the structural studies of language, grammar, and folktales. The primary aim of classical narratology was identifying and defining narrative universals, focusing on the structures of narrative that apply

across many narratives rather than any individual narrative's contents (Meister). In doing so, classical narratologists provided a toolkit for explaining what narrative looks like and how it happens that aids in the analysis of particular texts, even as those texts provide new adaptations and tools for the toolkit (Culler 8).

From the beginning of classical narratology, narrative has been a difficult concept to define. As Gerard Genette notes in his foundational *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, narrative as a term has “ambiguity,” and often introduces confusion because different scholars (especially across disciplines) are working from different understandings of what narrative is (25). It is noteworthy that play—the concept and activity often touted as the heart of games—is similarly ambiguous and hard to nail down, which Brian Sutton-Smith attributes at least in part to “popular culture rhetorics,” the narratives of common sense that operate by knowing it when you see it rather than by clearly defined terms (1, 7). As similarly ambiguous concepts, narrative and play seem to be extremely common elements of human experience and culture with many variable forms, suggesting that a theory of them (and especially of them together) must be similarly flexible.

Nevertheless some definitions are necessary for such a theory, and classical narratology provides several attempts at definitions of narrative. Genette, for example, isolated three primary meanings for narrative: an “oral or written discourse that undertakes to tell of an event or a series of events;” the “succession of events, real or fictitious, that are subjects of this discourse;” and the “event” of narrating, “the act of narrating taken in itself” (25-26). Synthesizing these meanings, he goes on to argue narrative is the “linguistic production undertaking to tell of one or several events [...] given to a verbal form, in the grammatical sense of the term: the expansion of a verb” (30). Genette's definition emphasizes the semiotic foundation of narrative, its

chronological nature present in the progression of an event(s), and its need for some form of action. The first two elements are also present in Gerald Prince's later definition, which has been commonly cited in game studies: "narrative is the representation of at least two real or fictive events or situations in a time sequence, neither of which presupposes or entails the other" (*Narratology* 4). So far, so good it would appear for applying classical definitions of narrative to games—games like *Vanishing* certainly involve events and their progression, and seem to inherently take a "verbal form" that requires the player's actions to proceed. The difficulty arises in interpreting phrases like Prince's "events or situations in a time sequence" as a linear, determined sequence that does not vary, as Aarseth does in *Cybertext*, where he argues that the multilinear and variable expressions of games make them incompatible with the linear nature of narrative (3, 7). Within the context of print literature in which Genette and Prince were working this interpretation can make sense, though even in that context there is nothing in their definitions that suggests that narrative should be limited to one particular linear sequence of events. In other words, there is little basis in classical narratology for assuming that narrative cannot vary or adapt, and there are even significant hints otherwise, such as Genette's emphasis on the "verbal form" that suggests action, growth, development, and possibility. Further, as Genette is careful to repeatedly emphasize, the definitions and tools he proposes are not meant to represent the definitive, essential, or eternal truths of narrative, rather they are concepts that must be refined and even replaced (32, 263). With these definitions in mind, I turn now to other tools that we can refine and replace for games.

Perhaps the most central concept in the study of narrative in its different forms is the distinction between story and discourse (alternatively, plot), or *fabula* and *syuzhet* as originally phrased in the work of Vladimir Propp and Viktor Shklovsky. Simply put, story or *fabula* refers

to the content plane of the narrative, the events that form the basis of the narrative in the order in which they happened, and the discourse or syuzhet refers to the expression plane of the narrative, how those events are organized and narrated in the text (Prince *Dictionary* 21, 73, 93).⁸ Similar to the difference between the signifier and the signified in the linguistic sign, it is the difference between story and discourse that creates meaning according to classical theories of narrative: “it is the play between the events as they exist at the level of story and the events as they are represented at the level of discourse that gives a narrative its particular capacity for meaning” (Puckett 239). In literature and film this distinction is often readily apparent, as in a novel when events are often portrayed in partial and limited ways through a particular character’s perspective, or rearranged and scrambled in a film such as *Memento* (Nolan 2000) or tv series such as *Westworld* (HBO 2016)—in each case, the events as portrayed in the discourse are not the same as the events as they exist in the story. It is discourse that makes the narrative meaningful in some sense, since the story on its own is just a description of a series of events in order (though one could rightly ask why a description of events in time should not count as a narrative).

The difference between story and discourse is readily observable in some games, including *Vanishing*. For example, throughout the game the player (as Paul Prospero) stumbles across a number of murder scenes, and must explore the surroundings to find clues as to how the

⁸ There is some confusion of these terms as used by different scholars. For example, Genette refers to the content plane of narrative as story, and the expression plan as “narrative” (27). Mieke Bal refers to the content plane as fabula, and the expression plane as story, putting story in the opposite position from other definitions (Bal 5). For the sake of clarity, I refer only to story as the content plane and discourse as the expression plane henceforth.



Figure 4. The murder scene for Travis, Ethan's brother. Travis is on the ground, with Ethan kneeling next to him, and Ethan's grandfather Ed approaching with a metal crank. The ghostly images are presented as a manifestation of Paul's paranormal abilities.

murder happened and in what circumstances (Figure 4). The clues consist of objects such as murder weapons or disturbed parts of the environment, and as the player interacts with them they are presented with ghostly traces of what happened around the clue. Once the player has found all of the clues and spectral scenes, they must put the events of the murder in the correct sequence in order to progress. In effect, the objects the player interacts with are indexical signs that signify past events, and the player is organizing them into a narrative. The construction of that narrative relies on story, the events in the order they happened, and discourse, the events as they are presented to the player, coming into alignment with one another. All of this is facilitated by the player's embodied experience as Paul Prospero in the game, whose paranormal powers allow the player to see the scenes in the first place, meaning that the narrative only becomes

possible through the perspective supplied by discourse.⁹ It is this subjective perspective that allows the player to discursively construct the narrative using elements provided by the story.

Yet other games, and even other sections of *Vanishing*, trouble the distinction between story and discourse. There are many moments in games where there does not seem to be a story in the narratological sense—there is not a predetermined series of events to be represented and reconstructed. For instance, much of the game outside of piecing together the murder scenes and Ethan's stories consists of navigating and exploring Red Creek Valley. As mentioned earlier, this involves narrative processes such as the player constructing a cognitive map of the space, linking their experiences up into their own narrative, and planning their next moves, yet these processes are more about the player progressively developing their own sense of the game's reality rather than reconstructing an established order of events. In other words, in the player's act of narrating their own actions, what Genette calls "producing narrative action," the story and the discourse seem to be one and the same from the player's perspective (27).

Other games further illustrate this issue. For example, in an open world game like *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios 2011), the player can complete quests that are a determined order of events, where story and discourse are present similar to the murder scenes and Ethan's stories in *Vanishing*.¹⁰ However the player can also explore the world outside of quests and create their own narratives for their character, such as becoming a vampire and

⁹ The fact the player is playing as a detective and solving crimes in *Vanishing* further highlights the significance of the story/discourse distinction in the dual-narrative structure of detective fiction, where the discourse follows the detective solving the case, and the story consists of the events of the crime. See Hodgson, "The Recoil of 'The Speckled Band.'"

¹⁰ Open world games consist of large virtual environments with many areas that the player can visit if/when they wish to. The open world format is typically used to give the player a greater sense of freedom in choosing where they want to go and what they want to do there ("Open World (Concept)").

terrorizing a village or romancing a character and building a home or a family. In such narratives there is no set order of events that constitutes a narratological story. Tamer Thabet explains this phenomenon as a merging of narrating and experiencing in the moment: “[The story/discourse distinction] 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” (32). The apparent conflation of story and discourse is not limited to games either, but rather is observable in other media. As Brian Richardson notes with drama, “In most plays, there is no significant difference between the sequence of events in the story (fabula) and the sequence in which they are performed on stage (sjuzhet),” though he goes on to note that there are often gaps between events in plays where players can assume or interpret a story (148). Similarly, Wendy Steiner argues that while paintings appear to lack the necessary “dual temporal structuring” of story and discourse, they are nonetheless quite capable of constructing meaningful narratives (149). Steiner further critiques the focus on the chronological order of events in story for having a slippage to how events “really happened,” pointing out that such an ordering is itself a mental construct with no greater claim to validity or reality than discourse (156). Putting games alongside these other media, it becomes clear that they are often not considered narrative because the supposedly universal elements of narrative, such as the story/discourse distinction, were developed from a very limited corpus of texts primarily in literature and film.

Thus while the distinction between story and discourse remains particularly useful for more determined narratives like novels and films, it has questionable presence in games—it is there sometimes, and in others it seems absent. A possible conclusion to this observation is the one repeatedly proposed in existing scholarship, that games simply are not narrative or are only

sometimes narrative. Yet this conclusion ignores or dismisses a wide variety of experiences players have and experience through narrative processes. Another possible conclusion is that games point us to how the story/discourse distinction might not actually be a fundamental or universal structure of narrative. In this view, story and discourse are rather extremely common (almost ubiquitous in some media) structures of narrative that are useful for providing an imaginative experience and creating meaning for an audience. While this is an entirely plausible and satisfactory explanation of narrative experiences in games, another possible conclusion is found in Mieke Bal's theorization of story (in her terms, *fabula*). Drawing on recent cognitive theories of narrative (to which I will return shortly), Bal describes story as "the result of the mental activity of reading," an "interpretation" or "memory trace" that produces the sense of a larger world through interaction with the text (10). In this sense, story is not a determined, chronological series of events, but rather a mental model of sorts, an imagined storehouse of content that the discourse both draws from and helps construct. Story is the sum of possible actions and events, similar to *langue* in semiotics, and discourse is the particular instantiation of actions and events in a given experience, similar to *parole*. To put this in terms of a game like *Vanishing*, the story is the collection of possible events and actions produced by the game system and the player's mental model of the game's reality that the player organizes into discourse through play. From the moment the player starts the game, story and discourse are dynamically interrelated, sometimes merging and sometimes diverging as the player encounters different established narratives (such as the murder scenes with a predetermined correct sequence) or emergent ones (such as the player exploring Red Creek Valley in no set order of events).

Adapting the story and discourse distinction in this way demonstrates how it is present throughout the player's experience of a game, but there remains a slippage between story as the

overall collection of possibilities and story as a determined order of events, as with *Vanishing*'s crime scenes and Ethan's stories that have correct solutions. To clarify this ambiguity, I propose that within a game's story, its system of various potential narratives, a game sometimes establishes a fixed series of events that players must uncover, play through, and reconstruct. This fixed series of events is a determined narrative, and the discourse created by the player's actions must to some degree adhere to it in order to progress through that part of the game. Many games have prominent determined narratives in their stories. For example, in *Skyrim* the primary determined narrative (often colloquially referred to as the main story) is the player's quest to become the Dragonborn, a hero who speaks the language of dragons and can stop an impending crisis of dragons being raised from the dead to conquer the world. The many smaller quests in the game are also examples of determined narratives, which require the player to complete specific tasks in order to progress. In *Vanishing*, the story is the overarching quest to find Ethan Carter and the many potential narratives the game allows for, and the individual murders and Ethan's stories are determined narratives that the player must complete in order to finish the game. Crucially, the determined narratives in a game's story and the discourse made in the player's play are not actually separate structures at all—rather, they are two sequences of events in play with one another. One sequence is the events as they happened, as written by a game's developers and provided for the player by the game. The other is that made by the player as they interpret, arrange, and narrate events through play. In essence, player picks elements from the game's story and assembles a discourse through play, occasionally having to match a determined narrative in order to progress.

Beyond a reconsideration of the distinction between story and discourse, classical narratology contributes the concept of narrative sequencing to the theory of narrative in games.

As Ryan points out, Gerard Genette, Gerald Prince, H. Porter Abbott, and Mieke Bal all define narrative as a representation of a “sequence of events” that may or may not be arranged in chronological order (Ryan “Toward a Definition of Narrative” 23; Bal 8). Claude Bremond argues much the same in his work on narrative possibilities and variability: “All narrative consists of a discourse which integrates a sequence of events of human interest into the unity of a single plot” (390). In narrative texts in literature, film, and television, this sequencing of events is largely done by authors and directors, and readers and viewers must sequence events in the story based on the discourse provided by the text. Players sequence events through their interactions with the game similarly to readers and viewers, with the major difference being that they are also active in arranging elements of the discourse. Specifically, as players encounter objects and events in play, they interpret the meaning of those game elements and fit them into their sense of the story, but they further affect where and how such elements appear in the discourse. For instance, when the player encounters a clue in *Vanishing*, such as the rock used to kill Travis, they must both figure out where the rock belongs in the sequence of events in the determined narrative of the murder and actively place the rock there in the play space. A similar situation happens in other games when players encounter a puzzle to be solved, a locked gate or barrier to be overcome, or an enemy to be defeated. They must mentally place the encounter in the story, and instantiate it in the discourse. As the player completes these smaller sequences of events and objects, they combine them with others they experience into longer narratives in what Prince calls “linking” (*Dictionary* 48).

Of course the process of narrative sequencing is not entirely freeform or without limitation, but rather is constrained both by what the game provides the player and what fits in a given situation in the game. It would not make much sense, for example, for the player to see the

murder rock in *Vanishing* and proceed to start searching for a cake. The boundary between what makes sense and what does not in sequencing events is not definitive. It is best thought of as a code, a “system of norms” that structure how a message is delivered to the player and how the player reasonably interprets and acts on that message (Prince *Dictionary* 14). Codes are used frequently throughout games and other media in order to guide audiences in their interpretation of a text, and in games often take the form of common tasks such as quests (kill ten weasels, escort a character to an objective, etc.), puzzles (rearrange objects, disarm traps, etc.), and combat (find a boss’ weak point, use a new weapon/special ability, etc.).

The primary difficulty in defining narrative as a sequence of events is in differentiating what counts as an event and what does not, or in other words where to locate the narreme, the smallest unit of narrative. Games readily illustrate this difficulty. Does the player simply moving count as an event, a narreme? Is a certain amount of movement required before it becomes an event? Or is it movement combined with an object that constitutes an event? Classical narratologists ran into similar questions with narrative in literature and film. As Prince notes, events are themselves “a collection of signs,” meaning that signs are the basis of events and narrative (*Narratology* 7). However if the sign on its own is the basic unit of narrative, then all language and meaning-making becomes narrative as signs come together. Several answers to this conundrum have been proposed. Barthes, for example, leaves the narreme as a vague entity, something more than “monemes and phonemes” of language but only discernible as “larger fragments of discourse referring to objects or episodes” (11). For Barthes, it is only when signs come together in groups in the “associative plane” that narrative begins (58-59). Prince proposes the concept of “different degrees of narrativity” to argue that some collections of signs are more narrative than others, meaning they are more likely to be understood and communicated as

narrative (*Narratology* 145). He further posits that, “Only groups of units having certain features and arranged according to certain patterns—only groups having certain structures—can constitute narratives” (82-83). While agreeing with Prince’s concept of narrativity, Ryan concludes that it is impossible to distinguish a “clearly definable narrative unit,” and consequently “narrative discourse cannot be described as a specific configuration of purely formal elements” (“Toward a Definition of Narrative” 24). The common thread across each of these solutions is that narrative is based on signs, but signs cannot be the basic unit of narrative because then everything is narrative.

Video games provide an opportunity to reconsider this conclusion. To be clear, it is not that games suggest that everything is narrative. Rather, games demonstrate how interacting with individual signs and objects involves sequencing them into narrative, and thus a sign has an inherent narrativity—a potential to become part of a narrative, even if it does not necessarily or always do so. In this sense, Ryan is quite right when she argues that there is no a priori category of “narrative signs” that are distinct from other signs, and narrative is better understood as a “certain type of cognitive construct” that brings signs together (“Toward a Definition of Narrative” 25). In play in games, signs become active and oriented in a narrative discourse, or in other words their narrativity is actualized as they are sequenced with other signs. It is this activity and energy that turns signs into events and makes them narrative, and it can happen to any sign. To further explain this process, I turn from classical narratology to deconstruction, a discourse well-suited to discussing the play of signs but often under-explored in narrative theory (Punday 1-2). Before moving on, however, a brief summary of what this theory of game narrative has picked up from classical narratology is helpful. Classical narrative theories provide the following: narrative in games is a sequence of events drawn from a game’s story, its

collective possible objects, events, and actions, and instantiated as a discourse through play. As I demonstrate next, these events can be further broken down into signs in play.

Deconstructing Narrative Play

Narrative is the sequence of events represented by signs in texts such as games, and deconstruction reveals how signs are always in play. This type of semiotic play is most evident in Derrida's work with signs, writing, and metaphysics in *Of Grammatology*. Derrida reformulates the sign, which in Saussurean semiotics consists of the relationship between a signifier and a signified, by arguing that the sign does not represent an external, objective reality, because there is no signified that corresponds with a thing itself for a signifier to refer to. In other words, when we see a word like "tree," the object that the word refers to is not a real, concrete object, but rather a perception and representation that we understand to be a tree. In this sense, the sign is a supplement, and one not to a real object but to other supplements: "The supplement is always the supplement of a supplement. One wishes to go back from the supplement to the source: one must recognize that there is a supplement at the source" (Derrida 330). There is no getting at the thing itself outside of signs and representations. The upshot of this philosophical argument is that signs have no recourse to essential being or external reality, and instead signifiers are chained endlessly together while the signified is deferred. Or, as Derrida puts it, "the signified always already functions as a signifier" (7). The deferral of the signified does not mean that there is no meaning, but rather that there is no final meaning. Signs and meaning are provisional and *playful*, always in motion, changing, and flowing together: "There is no signified that escapes, eventually to fall back, the play of signifying reference that constitute language. The advent of writing is the advent of play; today play yields to itself, [...] drawing along with it

all the reassuring signifieds, reducing all the strongholds, all the out-of-bounds shelters that watched over the field of language” (7). Derrida’s description portrays play in opposition to static structures (strongholds and shelters of language), and further presents it as an animating force for signification and meaning-making. In this sense, play in signs means motion, energy, and possibility—an activity that shapes meaning and drives it forward. Signs and the meaning they create are “unstable, decentered, multiple, fluid, emergent,” and this helps explain how they can come together in many possible interpretations and configurations to form events and animate narrative (Ryan *Narrative as Virtual Reality* 25).

To bring this theory back to signs in games, the signs the player encounters in a game have multivalent possibilities that they interpret and inscribe into a narrative discourse through play. In effect, the player activates signs and puts them into play, bringing them together into



Figure 5. A ghostly trace of the events surrounding the murder of Ethan’s uncle. The player must interpret the scene, search the area for similar clues, and reconstruct the correct sequence of events.

events and making them narrative. Derrida's explanation of signs in "picture-puzzles," similar to the visual signs of video games, illustrates this process. Describing the layout of such games, Derrida writes, "the signifier is broken or constellated into a system: it refers at once, and at least, to a thing and to a sound. The thing is itself a collection of things or a chain of differences 'in space;' the sound, which is also inscribed in a chain, may be a word" (97). This description of visual signs is useful because it reveals several principles of signs in pictures or images that translate to video games, as I will demonstrate with the *Vanishing* image here (Figure 5). The first is that a picture, itself a sign, can be broken down into smaller signs or fragments of signs—the things depicted. With the *Vanishing* image, the image itself is a sign for the game, a screenshot capturing its experience. It is comprised of other signs, including Ethan's relatives, a lantern, mausoleums, and bricks, and it is only by coming together that they shape this moment in play experience. The second principle is that these constituent signs are related to one another and are "constellated into a system." I add that the relationships between signs are playful ones in that the signs affect each other in the "chain of differences," especially in images that move or imply movement. In the *Vanishing* image, this is most evident in Ethan's family members, which act on each other in the image. Ethan's mother is turned toward his uncle, her attention drawn by his apparent weeping or injury. Ethan's father peers past them, looking at something in the mausoleum that someone had started to wall off. In such ways, the signs in the image are related to each other, oriented toward each other, and affecting each other, and the player must interpret and trace these relationships in order to piece together the narrative. Finally, the signs are associative in that they are multisensory, referring to both "a thing" (seeing) and "a sound" (hearing), "at least." Derrida's "at least" is significant: a sign can go beyond sight and sound, such as the *Vanishing* scene that refers to sight, sound, and feeling (the interaction with the scene

and its objects can be felt by the player through the controller). Combined, these principles reveal signs in pictures as fragmented and distributed, related and systematic, and associative and multisensory. These elements of signs create the conceptual space for play in a game, and demonstrate how individual signs come together as narrative.

The play of signs thus leads to narrative because signs have energy and possibility that orients them toward other signs. Recent work in semiotics elaborates this theory. As Gary Genosko notes, “Any given sign produces both intensity and meaning at once in a vertigo of superimposition [...]” (Genosko 176). The intensity of the sign that Genosko identifies does not remain in vertigo, but rather is channeled into structures like narrative, as Bruce Clark explains: “any one mark, when received as a cue for cognitive operations, has multiple implications already built into it. Bound up in any mark is a potential dynamism, a contingent or nonrandom concatenation of signifying events, that is always already on the way to narrative formation” (25). The sequencing involved in narrative thus provides form to the play of signs, organizing that play so that it creates meaning and makes sense. To a certain extent, this means that narrative limits and contains play, as “one of the effects of structure is to arrest force, to pin it onto intention” (Genosko 8). Yet as narrative constrains the play of signs, it is also animated by that play and holds out at least some potential for variation and emergence as signs are interpreted and linked together. Daniel Punday identifies this interrelationship in his description of narrative as “both a rearticulation and a transformation of deconstruction, both ‘bone structure’ and ‘reflex’” (171). By putting narrative in a deconstructive framework with the play of signs, then, it becomes clear that the individual unit of narrative can be the sign, because individual signs contain energy oriented toward sequencing into events and narrative. To be clear, a sign on its own is not narrative, but rather, to return to Prince’s term, has narrativity and

narrative potential. This potential is not always realized, as signs can come together into forms other than narrative, such as description or lyric. Nevertheless, as Punday puts it, “narrative is part of the functioning of discourse in general. [...] Narrative here is part of all language use” (Punday 10).

The play of signs, meaning their endless motion, change, and linking into forms such as narrative, is everywhere, and there is no conscious outside to it. In effect, it creates our experience of reality, and this is the metaphysics of writing that Derrida explains throughout *Of Grammatology*. As he writes, “from the moment there is sense there is nothing but signs. We think only in signs” (54). If everything in our reality is signs, then everything is in a sense textual, and subject in varying degrees to play with meaning and interpretation. Everywhere we are, we are always “in a text where we already believe ourselves to be” (177). There is, then, always the potential for narrative in our experiences, and in this light Barthes’ claim that “the narratives of the world are numberless” takes on new meaning (79).

In deconstructing narrative and play, the theory of narrative in games gains a modification: narrative in games is the sequencing of signs drawn from a game’s story (its collective possible objects, representations, and actions) into a discourse (consisting of events and chains of events) through play. Yet a final, vital piece is missing. As much as potential narratives are everywhere, those narratives are always tied to and affected by systems of cultural and sociopolitical power. In other words, the sequencing of signs into narrative is not the same universally for every player, but rather is mediated by the player’s embodied positionality and their lived experiences of race, gender, sexuality, and other intersecting identities. Subjectivity and context play significant roles in how we interpret and make narrative, and a theory of narrative must account for them. In order to address these realities, I turn now from

deconstruction to recent developments in postclassical narrative theories. In doing so, I follow a trajectory that Punday identifies from deconstruction to post-deconstructive criticism: “whereas deconstruction believes that knowledge is not objective because texts themselves are unstable, [post-deconstructive] criticism claims that objectivity is lost because critics are always located somewhere” (Punday 22). Postclassical narrative theories demonstrate how one can reconcile these arguments, because the instability of the text and the critical importance of sociopolitical context are interrelated elements of narrative.

Embodied Narratives: Cognitive, Queer, and Feminist Narratologies

Postclassical narratologies have gradually emerged since the 1980s, and have generally been marked by a “profusion of new methodologies and research hypotheses” in the study of narrative (Alber and Fludernik 1). Whereas the goal of classical narratology was to unearth the universal structures and grammars of narrative, postclassical narratologies focus in on particular features of narrative that often depend on context and change across different types of texts. The various strands of postclassical narratology are generally referred to as *narratologies* because they pursue different projects in narrative theory. In short, the major approaches to narrative in postclassical narratology are rhetorical narratology, which focuses on narrative as persuasive communication between a narrator and narratee; queer and feminist narratologies that highlight how gender and sexuality operate in narrative both in terms of content and structure; cognitive narratology that explores the cognitive processes involved in narrative texts; and natural and unnatural narratologies, which generally investigate mimesis, antimimesis, realism, and artifice in representation in narrative texts (Herman et al. 3, 9, 14, 20). While each narratology pursues its own trajectory, they all find their basis in classical narratology. Alber and Fludernik have

further argued that we have now entered a third phase of narratology which focuses on the overlaps, interconnections, and incompatibilities between the approaches (5). While each of the postclassical narratologies has something to offer the study of game narrative, I draw primarily on cognitive, queer, and feminist narratologies in order to focus in on the player's embodied experience of narrative in games and the cultural contexts that affect that experience. In doing so, I also argue for points of connection between these narratologies, which have hereto been largely separated.

Cognitive narratology provides additional tools and concepts for understanding how players sequence signs into events and narratives in games. The subfield began in the 1990s with the work of scholars such as Mark Turner, Manfred Jahn, Catherine Emmott, and David Herman, who sought to supplement literary theory and classical narratology with insights from the development of new technologies and concepts in cognitive neuroscience and psychology (Herman "Cognitive Narratology"). Cognitive narratology has produced many lines of inquiry ranging from the narrative representation of minds to emotion and states of mind in texts to evolutionary accounts of human storytelling, and all of these have potential insights for the study of game narrative (Palmer; Vermeule; Zunshine). However the version of cognitive narratology that most pertains to the sequencing of signs is the study of narrative as a structure for thought and interpretation, or in other words of narrative being a "fundamental to cognition" (Ryan "Introduction" 3). As Herman argues, it is hard to understand consciousness from our subjective vantage points—can consciousness fully grasp and study itself?—but narrative gives us the opportunity to see cognitive processes operating in a text and recognize the role that narrative plays in those processes (Herman "Directions in Cognitive Narratology" 156).



Figure 6. A trap built of logs and metal spikes that almost hits the player near the beginning of the game.

The first concept cognitive narratology provides the theory of game narrative is that of the mental model or storyworld, what I have hereto described as a sense of the story that the player develops and updates through play. Ryan points out that narrative is not located just in the “textual act of representation,” but also in the “mental image” that representations create, a “cognitive construct” that provides a picture of what is happening in the narrative (Ryan “Introduction” 9). Similarly, Herman argues that narrative is “a process of building and updating mental models of the worlds that are told about in stories” (*Story Logic* 1). This process is present throughout *Vanishing* from the moment the player enters Red Creek Valley. At first the valley seems to be a realistic portrayal of a relatively peaceful environment in the American Midwest, but the player quickly encounters a series of traps that require revising that assessment (Figure 6). The traps are signs and “textual cues” that the player uses to interpret their surroundings, and they draw upon both codes, the systems of recognizable norms in games, and

scripts, logical chains of events based on past experiences, in order to guide the player through the game (Herman *Story Logic* 10, 85). In particular, the traps trigger a common code and logic script in games that indicates there is danger and the player should anticipate that danger and act accordingly—large pointy spikes are deadly, someone put them there, and it is likely that someone is still around the play space somewhere. As the player encounters more parts of the game, they use scripts and codes to sequence them into narratives and update their mental model of the game’s reality. In this way, the model starts as a simple one and becomes a progressively more complex and nuanced reality. I use the term “reality” here rather than “storyworld,” as many games do not necessarily have a larger sense of an entire world, but rather create more localized realities, as in the valley in *Vanishing* that contains the entire play experience. Further, the play space of a game and the ongoing narrative process in play is experienced as a reality by the player, similarly to how mental models are experienced as realities in other narrative texts: “the storyrealm, the realm of conversation, indeed any realm, can engage perceivers as an ongoing reality” (Young 105).

The basis for every part of the theory of narrative in games from sequencing signs to mental models to realities is experience, the encounters the player has with a game as they play. The relationship between narrative and experience has been a primary focus for cognitive narratology in recent years. From one perspective, narrative is the structure that organizes experiences and makes meaning out of them, as Herman writes, “Narrative is not a cognitive crutch for those who cannot manage to think in more rigorous ways, but rather a basic and general strategy for making sense of experience” (*Story Logic* 24). At the same time, scholars such as Monika Fludernik have argued that a series of events does not become narrative unless there is someone there experiencing those events: “unless a text or a discourse registers the

pressure of events on an embodied human or at least human-like consciousness, then that text or discourse will not be construed by interpreters as a full-fledged narrative, but rather as (at best) a report or chronicle” (Herman “Cognition, Emotion, and Consciousness” 256). Thus narrative and experience seem deeply intertwined—experience needs narrative in order to make sense, and narrative needs experience in order to be a narrative at all. The point of connection between the two is the embodied consciousness that does the experiencing and narrativizing. The body functions as a “point-of-view on the world” and constitutes a “general medium” for having narrative experience in the first place (Ryan *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2* 147).

In video games like *Vanishing*, the body that does the experiencing is both the player’s body interacting with the game system and the avatar that acts as their extension in the virtual play space, such as the body of Paul Prospero. The body of the avatar is a digital representation of a body with various features added to mimic the feeling of a human body. For example, many walking simulator games like *Vanishing* do not have bodies for their player characters at all, rather the avatar is an in-game object about the relative height of a human with a camera where the head would be to allow the player to see and hear the other objects rendered in the play space. The virtual body of the avatar allows the player to enact themselves in the game, effectively coupling with the virtual environment in order to experience it (Caracciolo 18). The player senses the reality of the game through the avatar similar to how they sense the actual world around them, though this is usually limited to visual, auditory, and, to a lesser extent, haptic stimuli. As Bruce Clark explains, these “sensory transmissions” take on meaning and are interpreted by the player’s body through a series of “closed-operational translations internally producing cognitive qualities from sensory reports of external quantities” (Clark xiii). This is of course only a brief overview of the complex processes involved in experiencing a game, but it

demonstrates how the player goes about sensing virtual objects, attaching meaning to them, and ultimately organizing them into narrative realities.

While cognitive narratology provides a framework for explaining narrative as an embodied cognitive process active throughout a video game, it rarely considers how that process takes place within specific social and cultural contexts. This gap in cognitive narrative theories is particularly glaring given how the subfield deals extensively with other types of context—for example the spatial and environmental contexts in which minds are situated, or the media contexts that affect how a text constructs narrative and how audiences experience it (Herman “Directions” 138, 158). The recognition that narrative relies on the body is common, but the acknowledgment (much less the exploration) of the fact that bodies have positions in systems of power such as race, gender, and sexuality is usually absent. Instead, cognitive narratology often pursues what Patrick Colm Hogan has called literary and narrative “universals” (38). This has led queer and feminist scholars such as Robyn Warhol to claim, “Of the contemporary approaches current in narrative theory, cognitive narratology [...] is the least closely linked to feminist narrative theory, because the study of processes in the human brain necessarily privileges similarities among people over differences” (Herman et al. 10-11). While this has recently started to change, particularly in work on race and cognitive studies by scholars such as Sue Kim, Christopher Gonzalez, and Arij Ouweneel, there is still a pressing need to account for how we create, use, and understand narrative differently based on our lived experiences of difference. Queer and feminist narratologies provide several opportunities to do so, and suggest ways we can use narrative to construct and play with queer realities.

Broadly speaking, queer and feminist narrative theories deal with the relationships between gender, sexuality, and narrative. The immediately obvious relationship between them is

that narrative texts can contain representations of gender and sexuality, such as queer characters and relationships or stories that challenge social gender norms (Page 193-194).¹¹ Yet gender informs narrative beyond simply providing content for storytelling. Narrative is a structure that organizes meaning, and this means it privileges particular values such as order, containment, and legibility. In particular, narrative is often motivated by teleology, a progression toward a final goal or resolution that concludes the story. Common examples of this include the marriage plot that ends in reproduction of the family, or the hero's journey that ends in the defeat of some evil and the reproduction of the status quo. In each case the final goal of narrative is reproduction of some sort, as Judith Roof argues: "our very understanding of narrative as a primary means to sense and satisfaction depends upon a metaphorically heterosexual dynamic within a reproductive aegis" (xxii). Other scholars such as Ruth Page have noted how the reproductive aegis of narrative models heterosexual male desire for climax and closure, wherein narrative consists of mounting action (ahem) with one culmination and a swift denouement (198). In her work with video game narrative, Shira Chess further theorizes the climax in normative narrative structure as the "cum shot," "the ejaculatory moment intending reproduction that is inherent in straight narrative form" (85). Gender and sexuality are thus inherent in narrative structure, and are always present in some form in the experience of narrative. It is crucial to note that this presence is not natural or fixed, as though there are male and female or straight and queer narratives that are essentially different from one another (Page 201). Rather, gender is a cultural construct that always affects narrative form.

¹¹ For a comprehensive collection of queer representation in video games, including characters, relationships, items, and other content, see the LGBTQ Video Game Archive (<https://lgbtqgamearchive.com/>). The archive recently published the first history of queer games, *Rainbow Arcade: Over 30 Years of Queer Video Game History*.



Figure 7. A portal the player uses to access one of Ethan's storyworlds.

However narrative itself is not a fixed form, and one can have a narrative that is not limited to linear and normative ordering. Roof imagines that a queer or perverse narrative that breaks these molds would be “a narrative about narrative dissolution, a narrative that continually short-circuits, that both frustrates and winks at the looming demagogue of reproduction” (xxiv). Chess argues that video game narratives are such narratives in that they forego a singular climax in favor of smaller victories and rewards, enacting a “queer narrative middle” (88). One does not need to look far to find video games that challenge Chess’ claim—many games do rely on an anticipated final battle with a boss, for example—but she makes a strong case for the queer potentials of nonlinear and emergent narrative in games. *Vanishing* realizes some of this potential in its structure, wherein the player is constantly jumping between realities as they explore Red Creek Valley, solve murders in a ghostly realm, and play in the various storyworlds that Ethan created and left behind. For example, throughout the game the player must enter

portals to the other realities of Ethan's stories (Figure 7). These portals constitute moments of "narrative dissolution" and reformation when one reality fades and another takes its place, often instantiating new mechanics and assumptions that the player must adapt to. In Sara Ahmed's terms, the portals create instances of queer phenomenology by disorienting and reorienting the player: "moments of disorientation are vital. They are bodily experiences that throw the world up, or throw the body from its ground ... Such a feeling of shattering, or of being shattered, might persist and become a crisis" (157). By repeatedly disorienting the player, *Vanishing* employs a queer narrative structure with many starts, stops, and frustrations, even as those short-circuits ultimately lead to discovering what happened to Ethan.

The point where queer, feminist, and cognitive narratologies can most clearly come together is embodiment and the body's central role in narrative. Just as gender and embodied experience affect narrative structure, narrative affects gender and sexuality by shaping experience, identity, and subjectivity. As Roof argues, "The significant categories of life are already narrative both in our apprehension of them as significant and in our understanding of that significance" (xvi). One can observe this in *Vanishing* in how the game uses narrative to construct a particular embodiment for the player. The player is embodied in the game as Paul Prospero, a grizzled white male detective who comments throughout the game on his past experiences, the many cases he has solved, and the feeling that this would be his last adventure. It is not just that narrative is built up around these aspects of Paul's identity, these aspects of identity are themselves narratives—narratives of whiteness, maleness, and knowingness that are marshaled to create a character, a subjective perspective that focalizes the player's experience of the game. All of these narratives are present and active as the player senses and navigates Red Creek Valley as Paul, even if the player is not always consciously aware of them. At the same

time, the player's own body in the actual world is the medium for their experience of the game, and influences how they interpret and use narrative throughout play. In other words, different players are going to have different experiences with and relationships to a character like Paul or a game like *Vanishing*, and this is due at least in part to who we are as different people with different embodied positions in systems of social and cultural power. Again, the point is not to essentialize or naturalize these differences, but to recognize that narrative cannot exist completely apart from them. Perhaps the greatest benefit of a theory of narrative based on games is that it helps us see how we can play in and with these narratives, and further how that play can do the critical work of changing them.

Playing/Queering Narrative

Already the theory of game narrative has been on quite a journey. From classical narratology it found a basis in the distinction between story and discourse and the concept of sequencing events. From deconstruction it picked up the ideas of action and play in signs and claimed the sign as the basic unit of narrative. Finally, from postclassical narratology it identified the sequencing of signs into narrative as an embodied cognitive process that constructs realities, a process that always exists in the context of systems of social and cultural power such as race, gender, and sexuality. Where have we arrived, then? What does our hero look like in their accumulated outfit? Bringing it all together, we arrive at the following definition of narrative: narrative in games is the embodied cognitive process of sequencing signs drawn from a game's story (its collective possible objects, representations, and actions) into a discourse (consisting of events and chains of events) through play. The player uses narrative to organize and make sense of their experiences in a game, ultimately building a reality through their interactions with the game system.

This definition is necessarily minimalist, recognizing the narrativity and potential for narrative in many modes of thinking and interactions with game objects, as well as accounting for how simple sequences consisting only of a few signs can build into larger realities. At the same time, it leaves space for types of writing and meaning-making that are not narrative, or not best understood as narrative, such as static descriptions, lists, or lines of code. As Ryan notes, narrativity is not binary, but rather a “fuzzy set allowing variable degrees of membership, but centered on prototypical cases that everybody recognizes as stories” (“Toward a Definition of Narrative” 28). My definition of narrative is further inspired by Ryan’s argument that a minimalist theory that highlights different aspects of narrative makes space for “do-it-yourself” definitions of narrative, where the qualities of narrative are scalable and people can draw the line between what is or is not narrative where they want it to be (30). Others can and likely do draw that line above where I do in games. Yet wherever one draws that line, it still rests on forms and processes below it, and unearthing how these things operate is worthwhile. This approach helps move the discourse on narrative forward by focusing less on getting everyone to agree with one universal definition of narrative and more on finding relationships between our understandings of it. It further reorients scholarship from the question of “is this a narrative” to more useful explorations of how narrative functions and what we can do with it.

The benefit of a theory of narrative based on games is that it reveals how narrative is active in our moment-to-moment experiences in play and elsewhere. As first-person experiences, games like *Vanishing* demonstrate how the same processes we use to navigate and play in virtual worlds are used in the navigation of our daily lives. The virtual realities of video games are technological fabrications that only mimic to varying degrees the actual worlds around us, but how we make meaning in them with narrative is directly related to how we do so everywhere

else. Bal puts it succinctly when she writes, “Not that everything ‘is’ narrative; but practically everything in culture has a narrative aspect to it, or at the very least, can be perceived, interpreted as narrative” (Bal 225). Narrative then is a site where we can see that the virtual is not so different from the real, though it often remains important for us to distinguish them in order to orient ourselves.

Finally, if narrative is an essential part of how we construct our virtual and actual realities, then it is an essential part of how we can change them. Of course narrative is no panacea, but, as Roof argues, “if narrative is the representational ideology that glues discursive fields into insurmountable fortresses, then perhaps via narrative it will also be possible to take them apart” (xxxvi). Video games show us how we can play with narrative, and that play always holds the potential of beginning “to think in a radically different way,” even if that potential is not often realized (Roof 187). In the chapters that follow, I highlight opportunities to play with narrative in games in queer ways, with the aim of imagining and building queer realities.

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Chapter 2

PokéStories: On Narrative and the Construction of Augmented Reality

On July 22, 2017, Niantic hosted the first *Pokémon GO* Fest: an event that would celebrate the game in Chicago's Grant Park with "thousands of Trainers from the community!" (Niantic). The event featured increased encounters with Pokémon in the park, trainers working together to overcome challenges and earn rewards, and team lounges so players from the game's Team Instinct, Team Mystic, and Team Valor could meet up, relax, and swap stories of their *Pokémon GO* experiences. The overarching narrative of the day was supposed to be one of players coming together as a community in order to get outside, explore, play, and enjoy each other's company. However, as Megan Farokhmanesh narrates in her article, "I Went to *Pokémon GO* Fest, and It Was A Disaster," things did not go as planned: "as connectivity problems and in-game crashes made *Pokémon Go* unplayable for attendees, the day spiraled into a large-scale echo of the game's earliest problems" (Farokhmanesh). Eventually Niantic announced refunds and special rewards for everyone who attended the festival, but that did little to assuage frustrated and disappointed players who left with negative experiences and stories of the day.

While *Pokémon GO* Fest was a failure as a celebration, it is an excellent example of how the game spawns narratives of play experiences. Each player had a different experience of the event, such as driving all night to get there from Ohio, flying from Atlanta, or winning tickets in a raffle so they could attend, and this meant that every player had a different story to tell about it. When the game became unplayable that day, many players gathered in areas around the main stage to swap these stories and commiserate about how disappointing the event was (Farokhmanesh). As these stories came together, they contributed to the larger, collective narrative of the event as a failure, a ripoff, a fiasco. Narratives like these shape how players, both

as individuals and communities, understand the game and their experiences with it, and they emerge through players' multivalent interactions with the game and with each other.

The stories players tell about *Pokémon GO* and their experiences playing it—their PokéStories—demonstrate how narrative is more than a written or programmed series of events related by a text (Eskelinen 111). While narrative can certainly take that form, it is also an aspect of player experience and cognition. In this sense, narrative is an ongoing process in *Pokémon GO* that constructs the stories that we tell each other about the game, and these PokéStories are a crucial part of how we make sense of the game, relate to it, and even navigate it in each moment of play. As we play *Pokémon GO*, we link the signs, experiences, and events we encounter in it together into meaningful sequences that are narrative in terms of Sanford and Emmott's definition of narrative: They are chronologically ordered, proceed from one event to the next, and earlier events in the sequences contribute to later ones (1). Brian Upton describes how this narrative process of sequencing events actively structures our experiences of the game, and helps us assess and choose our next actions, which will become the next events in the sequence (223). As the narrative sequences that emerge in the playing of *Pokémon GO* extend and accrue, they become the PokéStories that players use to understand and relate their experiences with the game, such as the stories of failed and frustrated playing at *Pokémon GO* Fest. These stories both affect (and to some extent effect) players' realities while playing the game, because they organize and mediate players' experiences. In doing so, PokéStories construct a sense of reality for each player, one that takes place within the larger augmented reality of *Pokémon GO*. Thus, an augmented reality such as *Pokémon GO*'s requires narrative and the stories that it produces in order to make its reality possible, and narrative is a powerful tool for shaping (and reshaping) these realities in games.

Of course there are many factors that affect narrative in *Pokémon GO*. The process of generating stories is emergent and playful and contributes to an augmented reality that is as rich and varied as the people who play it all around the world. In order to account for these shifting qualities of narrative in the game, this chapter develops a model of narrative based on the complex interactions of game system, player experience, and social and cultural context. All of these considerations are present in the narrative processes of *Pokémon GO*, and indeed it would be impossible to have a PokéStory that did not involve each of them in some way. By building this model of narrative, we can gain a better understanding of how *Pokémon GO* constructs its augmented reality, and we better grasp narrative as a living and playful process that structures our experiences and realities.

***Pokémon GO* and the Ludification of Narrative**

Narrative in *Pokémon GO* is established and constrained in part by the game's systems, including its hardware, software, and rules, and any model of narrative in the game must account for these systems. *Pokémon GO* is commonly described as an augmented reality game, a game that, as Jon Peddie describes it, provides “a real-time view of information overlaid on a view of the real world” (20). In the case of *Pokémon GO*, the game creates an augmented reality by projecting digital representations onto actual space, and uses the GPS, mapping, and camera functions of a smartphone in order to allow players to find digital Pokémon in the spaces around them. As such, *Pokémon GO* is both an augmented reality game and a location-based mobile game (LBMG), a “melding of virtually delivered information and physical sensory experience” (Bunting 165). *Pokémon GO* further connects many different domains of experience, including the digital, the fictional, the social, the political, and of course the economical, among many others. The many intersections present in the game have even prompted some scholars to claim it

heralds a new category of “supercomplexity,” a phenomenon that “moves fully across physical, social, and virtual spaces” (Clark & Clark 2). This supercomplexity that defines the game’s melding of the digital and the actual, the technological and the human, and the individual and the social, also defines the game’s narrative processes. One cannot look to the game’s representations, players, or social elements alone to explain the existence and meaning of PokéStories. All of these domains play a role in narrative, and in shaping *Pokémon GO*’s augmented reality for players.

Pokémon GO’s ability to mobilize multiple technologies and domains of experience so effectively (or not, as seen in Pokémon GO Fest) is itself the result of a confluence of cultural trends in recent years. As Brendan Keogh argues, the technological capacity for augmented realities is not new, and *Pokémon GO*’s success with it is due more to the “Pokémon franchise’s sheer brand power and the ubiquity of the smartphone” than it is to augmented reality as a novel or meaningful possibility (41). Neither augmented reality, the Pokémon franchise’s popularity, nor the prevalence of the smartphone emerged suddenly. Each of these things has a history that reaches back at least to the 1990s, and in their current intersections in games like *Pokémon GO* we can see how emerging technologies and transmedia franchises are affecting how we interact with our environments, each other, and even reality itself. For example, Frans Mäyrä posits that *Pokémon GO* reveals the “ludification” of society, wherein our social structures, institutions, and daily experiences are becoming increasingly playful, and rely on gaming complex systems of rules, strategies, and possibilities (49).

I would add to Mäyrä’s argument that *Pokémon GO* points us to the ludification of narrative itself: no longer completely linear or fully determined, narrative is increasingly mediated by many technologies, platforms, bodies, and spaces, and its variable and emergent

forms demand recognition of narrative as a living and playful process. Game studies has long defined narrative as a static linear or multilinear series of events (Aarseth 43), as events, settings, and rules that build a sense of a world or storyworld (Ryan 34), or as a set representation of events, such as a game's "cutscenes and backstories" (Eskelinen 224). Central to all of these definitions is the idea that narrative is a relatively stable and established series of events and representations, even if games sometimes allow the player to choose between different series. Yet, as Roine argues, this understanding of narrative, largely borrowed from other media such as literature or film, fails to account for how a game's story "is not monolithic," but rather "a result of many small fragments used in the performance" of playing the game and the interaction between player and system (83). A ludified understanding of narrative, then, accounts for how players are constantly assembling and interpreting their own stories as they play. While ludic narrative in a game like *Pokémon GO* is experienced as linear, it is much more playful, variable, and emergent than existing models account for. *Pokémon GO* provides an excellent opportunity to build a new model of narrative that addresses this issue, and highlights how games and other contemporary media "now appear to us as phenomena to be cut, pasted, reassembled, and distributed with ease" (83).

Given the need for a ludified understanding of narrative, I offer the following definition of narrative in order to build a model of narrative based on *Pokémon GO*. Narrative is the process of storytelling, of organizing signs and events into meaningful sequences. Narrative often involves a storyteller (author or narrator), an audience (narratee), and a message (a story), though it can sometimes be difficult to distinguish these in games, where different stories emerge through players' interactions with game systems and each other. The interplay between player and game system means that gameplay involves several interrelated narratives and produces

stories such as those written into the game by developers and those that the player develops of their own play experiences (Journet 93). These narratives are made of signs—representations, information, and sensory inputs, including haptic, auditory, and especially visual stimuli. Players experience, interpret, and organize signs as they navigate a space, whether that be a virtual space or actual space as in *Pokémon GO* (113). Navigating a space also requires action and motion, suggesting that movement itself is part of the narrative process, and that activities like walking around in *Pokémon GO* are laden with at least basic meaning that become part of the game's stories and drive them forward. Galloway explains the significance of movement by comparing action to language when he wrote, "Video games create their own grammars of action," including "physical vocabularies" that players use to play a game and create meaning in it (4). Motion, images, sounds, feelings, and other sources and forms of meaning come together in a type of "narrative accrual" during the experience of play, and are structured by narrative into what we perceive as reality (Bruner 18).

Recognizing game narrative as the interaction between player and system is not new, and the idea that the player is active in it is well-trodden ground. Yet, as Bunting, Hughes, and Hetland argue, mobile, augmented reality games like *Pokémon GO* further alter our understanding of narrative because they take it on the road, as it were: They take gameplay and its narratives beyond the constraints of traditional gaming consoles or PCs, and mingle virtual spaces with many more spaces in the actual world where new possibilities can emerge. They wrote, "By extending the game beyond the screen and into the physical world, these games co-opt the player's sensory experiences of real-world places as potential storytelling tools, mixing the physical and virtual to create immersive hybrid gameworlds" (Hetland et al. 144). Further, as Eanes & van den Broek note, the game actually cannot be played effectively while sitting still; it

requires movement and has resulted in significant increases in physical activity amongst players (32). The player's body, as well as the game system, mediates the narrative process, and creates a sense of a world or a reality wherein play takes place. By recasting narrative as the gradual construction of meaning, resulting in a world, we can arrive at "a storytelling model in which the story of import is the nonlinear, non-narrative unfolding of a player's experience of a gameworld as it is co-created by the gamemaker and the player" (Hetland et al. 148). Bunting, Hughes, and Hetland referred to this process as "non-narrative" because they argue that narrative and story exist on different levels or scales. My view is different: narrative is the process that creates a story, rather than a larger category or type of story. We identify similar processes here but differ in calling them narrative based on these definitions.

With a ludified understanding of narrative in place, it is possible to develop a model of narrative processes in *Pokémon GO* and other games (Figure 8). *Pokémon GO*'s narrative is the confluence of multiple processes proceeding from different sources and through various mediations. The first process emerges from the team (or teams) that makes the game, in this case Niantic and to a lesser extent their telecommunications partners (such as Sprint and Boost Mobile for *Pokémon GO* Fest). The narrative laid down by the developers of a game is generally scripted and players cannot do much to change it, though they may be able to make decisions within it. I call this *determined narrative*. This narrative consists of the lore and backstory embedded in the virtual world of the game, such as the world of Pokémon, trainers, professors, and teams in the case of *Pokémon GO*. Determined narrative is distinct from, but intricately tied to, the stories that the players can produce for themselves within the game. I call the stories

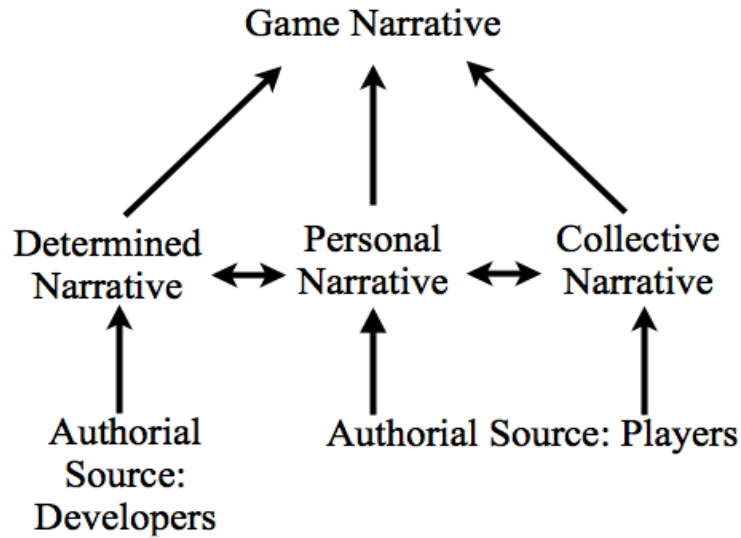


Figure 8. The interwoven narratives that create game narrative.

created by players *personal narrative*. Personal narrative emerges through the stories players attach to their characters, stories enabled by the customization and choices allowed for by the developers in the determined narrative. Finally, an additional narrative emerges when multiple players come together in groups, as with *Pokémon GO* Fest or when players undertake a raid against a legendary Pokémon. The interactions between players tell stories that I term *collective narrative*. Collective narrative is active when players interact, either helping or hindering each other as they adventure in the virtual world. It can be seen on smaller scales, such as a family playing together and sharing stories of their play (see Sierra & Burgoon in this collection), and it is especially apparent when players band together for large events. In working together the players create a collective story, one that is comprised of players but at the same time irreducible to the sum of individual experiences. Determined, personal, and collective narrative are interrelated and codependent, and it is only together that they construct augmented reality.

In order to put this model of narrative processes into action, the following sections provide close examinations of each in *Pokémon GO*. Each section explains what that type of

narrative contributes to the game and what it means, and, further, how the different types come together. By developing this theory of ludic narrative and highlighting the playful confluence of different narratives we can gain new understanding of what narrative is, how it operates, and why it matters. These questions have been at the center of ongoing discussions in fields such as literary theory and psychology. Literary theorists Alan Palmer and Lisa Zunshine, for example, argue that we read fiction and engage in narrative because they allow us to encounter the minds of others in characters or authors; in other words, narrative is a social activity (Palmer 32; Zunshine 162). Keith Oatley, a cognitive psychologist, claims that narrative is an emotional stimulus, and it is important for its ability to make its audience feel something (39). These theories are not mutually exclusive, and indeed fit well within the larger theory developed by Jerome Bruner that argues that narrative is one of the primary processes we use to understand and navigate the world: “The system by which people organize their experience in, knowledge about, and transactions with the social world ... is narrative rather than conceptual” (*Acts of Meaning* 35). In this sense, narrative shapes our realities because it produces stories that help us understand ourselves and the world around us. Narrative, then, is an organizing principle that does more than merely represent reality; it actively constructs it (Bruner, “The Narrative” 5). As the following sections demonstrate, this same process is active in our experiences of augmented reality. By bringing together the different narrative processes created by developers, produced by the game system, or experienced by players, *Pokémon GO* affords players the opportunity to create and play their own PokéStories, and to thereby shape the game’s augmented reality.

Determined Narrative

Determined narrative is the first narrative players encounter in *Pokémon GO*, and it is put forward by the developers in order to establish the world of Pokémon in the game and give all

players a common ground for their stories. The first time players begin the game, they are introduced to Professor Willow, a fictional Pokémon professor who tells the player that the world is filled with Pokémon and he needs their help to research them: “You’ll need to find and collect Pokémon from everywhere!” The introduction proceeds to allow players to choose their avatar’s style from a number of preset options, help them catch their first Pokémon from three options (with a fourth hidden one!), and pick their nickname in the game. Once the player reaches level 5, they can join one of the three teams directed by Professor Willow’s assistants: Team Instinct (led by Spark), Team Mystic (led by Blanche), and Team Valor (led by Candela). While there are choices built into this narrative, each player is going to have a similar experience. The game’s determined narrative does not change much if a player picks a different starting Pokémon or joins a different team, though their personal and collective narratives can change based on who they align themselves with and who they end up fighting.

The determined narrative of the game is significant because it establishes the content of its augmented reality, and it does so by drawing on the lore, mechanics, and player expectations established throughout the Pokémon franchise. Pokémon is a transmedia story, and the narratives of Ash and the other protagonists journey from region to region of the Pokémon world across video games, television, films, comics, manga, toys, and other merchandise (Geraghty 4). Each installment of the transmedia universe involves collecting, battling, trading, or even dressing up Pokémon, and further explores a world where Pokémon and humans live alongside each other. By drawing on the expansive narratives of earlier games and other media, *Pokémon GO* quickly taps into a recognizable world that augmented reality can mix with our own. For example, when the player starts the game and encounters a professor who studies Pokémon, they know they are at the start of an adventure because every major installment of the Pokémon franchise (including

the main games, the anime, etc.) has started the same way. Similarly, when they are handed their first Pokéballs, they know that they need to throw them at the Pokémon they want to catch, likely without the attendant tutorial telling them so. The continuation of these earlier narratives and mechanics provides the virtual spaces of augmented reality with a sense of time and existence beyond the player—Pokémon have a history without the player, and presumably a present and a future which the player will affect somehow. All of this combines to make the virtual world feel real, and gives the player a sense of presence, or of “being there” (McMahan 68). *Pokémon GO*’s augmented reality coheres because of determined narrative, and it is determined narrative that provides the initial reasons for players to explore that reality and interact with each other.

The determined narrative also establishes *Pokémon GO*’s themes, meanings, and values, though players also bring their own to the game once they start playing. As Lincoln Geraghty argues, the adventures of Ash and other protagonists in the franchise play out in conjunction with their emotional and personal journeys, wherein the characters learn about friendship, cooperation, perseverance, and being true to oneself (4). *Pokémon GO* continues this trend, and places the player in the role of a young adult venturing into the world to discover, learn, and overcome challenges in what is in many ways a typical hero’s quest narrative. Pokémon’s quest narrative valorizes a particular set of values, the first of which is curiosity and exploration. Christian McCrea notes this: “the playing subject of Pokémon is interpellated as a relentless explorer and opportunist, who gains from consistent movement and methodical approaches over long periods” (43). In *Pokémon GO* this is seen in how the game pushes players outside to find more Pokémon, Pokéstops, and gyms. The mobility and challenges of exploration lead to the second value, which is progression, leveling, training, or getting stronger—the “progressive digital revelation” of a developing character realizing their destiny as the greatest Pokémon

trainer (45). In *Pokémon GO*, this value manifests in either catching stronger Pokémon or leveling up existing ones so they are more capable of fighting in battles at gyms. The final value is combat and competition, evident in how the games, including *Pokémon GO*, encourage players to either battle each other's Pokémon or to participate in raids against rare and powerful Pokémon at a gym.

While *Pokémon GO*'s determined narrative contributes a great deal to the content, coherence, and values of the game's augmented reality, it remains a relatively simple narrative. Once the player enters the game and begins to explore the actual world with it, they are mostly left to have their own experiences and stories without further intervention from the characters in the determined narrative. Professor Willow and the team leaders rarely make appearances in the game outside of offering tips occasionally or, in Professor Willow's case, allowing you to trade in Pokémon for upgrades. The great benefit of this limited determined narrative is that it opens more space for players' personal narratives. Jagoda et al. note this in their work on alternate reality games: open-ended play allows for more variance and emergence in player experiences, and thus more room for the players to play with their own experiences and understandings of the game (91). To see what they do with this, I turn now to personal narrative, the stories that emerge from players' experiences of the game. As Cardoso and Carvalhais argue, this is representative of the relationship between hardcoded, scripted events and procedural, emergent occurrences in games: as the events become more determined, there is less emergence, and vice versa (26).

Personal Narrative

The determined narrative that establishes *Pokémon GO*'s augmented reality for the player is the first narrative in the game, but it would not be successful (narratively or financially)

without the player's further input in the form of personal narrative. Personal narrative begins with the player's initial choices within the determined narrative, including the process of creating a character, wherein the player authors their own representation in the game within a set of constraints. Each character will be at least slightly different from other players' characters, but always within the limits of the customization options the game provides. This freedom-within-constraints situation is representative of every interaction the player has with the game, but especially the limited choices presented to them initially. It isn't that personal narrative does not exist in these early decisions (a player choosing Bulbasaur has a different story with different possibilities, experiences, and meanings than one choosing Squirtle), but rather that the determined narrative takes the lead in introducing the player to the game.

Personal narrative is much more prevalent once players are free to actively explore the world on their own. As players move around the actual world with the game, they encounter different Pokémon based on where they are (their biome) and which Pokémon randomly appear near them. In some cases, Pokémon are only found in specific regions of the actual world, such as Tauros found only in North America, or Lunatone in the Eastern Hemisphere. The Pokéstops and gyms that players have access to also affect their stories of the game, particularly by determining the difficulty they have in obtaining the game's resources. Finally, *Pokémon GO*'s use of augmented reality is founded on interaction with the actual world, meaning that anything that happens in the world around players can impact their stories in profound ways. These are the small but constant occurrences that Gail Shivel states can "subtly but irrevocably change one's gameplay," and I add that they subtly alter a player's personal narrative (211). There are many examples of how players share their experiences as stories, ranging from players' forum posts to blogs to social media to news articles. For a particularly humorous example, consider Elise

Favis' article, "The Most Bizarre *Pokémon Go* Stories We've Heard Thus Far," which detailed players' escapades searching for Pokémon in caves, over cliffs, or even running into parked cop cars (a less humorous narrative is people finding Pokémon at the Holocaust Museum) (Favis). The different experiences players have give life to personal narrative, and encourage players to share their stories with each other—a phenomenon I will return to shortly with collective narrative.

All of these examples demonstrate the importance of space to personal narrative in a location-based mobile game like *Pokémon GO*. Sierra and Burgoon note that "knowledge of and means to successfully navigate the local environment are essential to *Pokémon GO*," and that knowledge and navigation will vary greatly based on where players live, travel, and play (18). Players play in different spaces, and as a result they have different encounters and tell different stories. This is because the relationship between actual and virtual space in augmented reality shifts with location. As augmented reality overlays actual space with virtual spaces and objects, actual space also writes itself onto virtual space. The actual space determines what appears on the screen for the player, including the environment and the Pokémon that appear, yet what appears on the screen also determines a player's perception of the actual world around them. In other words, augmented reality is more than a digital projection or representation—it's an active construction of reality based on the interplay of actual and virtual space. Hjorth and Richardson address this in their discussion of how play adds meaning to space and turns it into place: "Place, as it is enacted through play, highlights the collaborative, performative, and creative dimensions of cartography" (6). As players navigate space with *Pokémon GO*, they are mapping and shaping spaces into places as part of an augmented reality.

While this process is a technological and cognitive one, it is also a narrative: it involves the constant organizing of signs and events into meaningful sequences that may or may not be shared with others. One can see this in players' personal narratives of where they went and what they did there: they generated narrative as they moved through and experienced spaces. Richard Walsh discusses this with what he calls "emergent narrative," the idea that narrative develops simultaneously with sequences of events. He argues that events and phenomena in a game become narrative when the player attaches semiotic meaning to them and they become representative or communicative (79). This is a continuous process as players navigate space in the game and strategize what to do or where to go next; it is the "development and exchange" between player and space that constructs "lived experiences of places" (Ruston 115).

The massive amount of places players can go with *Pokémon GO* and the choices they make while navigating spaces makes personal narrative a source of nearly infinite variation. Some of this variation has to do with the players themselves, because different players focus on different things and experience things differently. For example, players who value the competition and combat of *Pokémon GO* over its story often narrate their experiences more in terms of gameplay decisions than an elaborate story. Other players are more likely to focus on developing narratives or roleplaying (Lindley 190). Beyond explicitly narrative considerations, players have many different motivations—Yang and Liu identify seven specific to *Pokémon GO*: exercise, fun, escapism, nostalgia, friendship maintenance, relationship initiation, and achievement (55). All of these are various reasons for and ways of playing, and each affects the narrative construction of augmented reality for the player.

As important as different playstyles are to narratives in augmented reality, intersectional identity categories are even more so because they determine who gets to access augmented

reality and in what ways. As Helen Thornham argues, as players play, “a certain type of gamer is being constructed,” a gaming identity that exists in relation to power (19). GamerGate—the online harassment campaign targeting women and feminist game critics that began in 2014—and toxic gaming communities have made it clear how players have to exhibit certain qualities in order to be fully accepted in gaming cultures. Namely, players should be white, straight, and male, and exhibit qualities of mastery and dominance. Those who do not meet these ideals (or who only meet them in part), such as women, players of color, LGBTQ folk, and players with disabilities, often have to hide or diminish parts of themselves and accept that they are the butt of jokes. While this pertains especially to online communities, it is written onto every experience that players have with *Pokémon GO*: “The culture, place, identity, and embodiment of the player all inform their experience of *Pokémon GO*, highlighting the uneven politics of mobile games and everyday play and their intrinsic relationship to power” (Hjorth and Richardson 4). For example, consider how a person with a disability might experience navigating space in the game differently, how someone living in a neighborhood deemed as dangerous (often based on race and class in the United States) might be less able to explore with the game at night, or how a queer player might have to avoid certain spaces while playing. Intersectional identities and sociocultural contexts can also make it very easy for some to participate, as Sierra and Burgoon discuss in their chapter in the context of large, affluent suburbs near metropolitan cities. Thus, when players are generating their personal narratives of the game, “the prioritization offered within the narrative is as much to do with the narrator’s own performed identity and the socio-cultural moment and context of that performance, as it is to do with the narrated events” (Thornham 22). Ultimately this demonstrates a crucial truth about the narrative construction of augmented reality: Narratives are not neutral or objective, and not everyone has equal access to

them. If we truly want to make augmented realities available and welcoming to everyone, then we have to confront social, cultural, and institutional power structures and the narratives we have about them.

Already one can sense that personal narrative is never separate from collective narrative, the stories players tell when they come together in groups. Collective narrative demonstrates the same balancing act between individual difference and group commonality that determined narrative and personal narrative have to navigate. In other words, it has to bring players together as a recognizable whole while also providing space for interesting and meaningful difference in players' experiences. This is especially true in mobile games like *Pokémon GO*, where there is a constant tension between public space and private experience, between “individual and community interfaces” as we navigate public spaces with our personal devices (Farman 116). Eanes and van den Broek discuss this tension at greater length in terms of “locational privacy,” the phenomenon of being alone in public spaces that many *Pokémon GO* players experience (18). To see how players come together and construct group experiences and stories, I turn to the collective narratives of *Pokémon GO*.

Collective Narrative

In *Pokémon GO* players are constantly interacting with each other through battling, messaging, or talking to each other when they are in the same place. In doing so, players bring their personal narratives into contact, resulting in collective narrative. Collective narrative is thus tied to individuals and their personal narratives, but it also becomes its own distinct narrative because it is irreducible to the mere sum of its parts and it is not attributable to individual players. For example, the narrative of how terrible *Pokémon GO* Fest was emerged from

thousands of individual players' stories, but the larger, group narrative of the day could not be traced back to any one individual.

In order for a collective narrative like *Pokémon GO* Fest's to happen, there has to be a shared experience, feeling, or sense of events amongst players. As multiple people experience the same thing (even if their experiences of that thing are different), a curious form of intersubjectivity emerges that could be described as a distributed imagination or collective consciousness. This group imagination or consciousness is created by the shared experience and a willingness to participate in the same fiction (or augmented reality) that results from it. Seth Giddings posits that this imagination in *Pokémon GO* is a "social phenomenon rather than a solitary, internal process as [imagination] is generally characterized" (60). The content for this shared imagination, and the collective narratives it produces, is the common stories, mechanics, and values provided by the determined narrative of the game, combined with elements of each person's personal narrative. In contributing to the shared imagination and collective narrative, however, no one individual can claim ownership of it—the narrative belongs to the group and is a shared reality. Further, players have to rely on each other in collective narrative because, as Jagoda et al. explain, "no single player can experience every event, solve each puzzle, or know every narrative detail" (78). Players can thus refer to the collective narrative in order to find both shared experiences and parts of the experience that they may have missed.

What really necessitates cooperation and forges collective narrative, however, is combat and competition. In raids or group gym battles, for example, the players must use their Pokémon to support each other because it would be impossible to overcome the challenges alone. As more players become involved in a challenge, the collective narrative shifts in order to accommodate them. In raids against legendary Pokémon, players and their Pokémon appear on

each other's screens and become part of the group story. This happens dynamically as players join or leave the raid, and as their Pokémon faint and are replaced by other Pokémon. In effect, this means collective narrative is constantly shifting according to player interaction and producing a story that is irreducible to any individual player's experience. In working and struggling together, the players form communal bonds of shared identity based on their experience, and a shared consciousness emerges when players narrate themselves together as "we" (Krzywinska 112). Included in the collective consciousness can be a sense of belonging built on the knowledge that one is contributing to the success or failure of the group. This also appears outside of raids and gyms in player associations, such as the teams from the determined narrative: Instinct, Mystic, and Valor. The teams are networks of players who infrequently perform group activities together, often in emergent situations where team members happen to be in the same place at the same time. The teams promote player affiliation to a group, and encourage a collective identity defined against other groups. While members of the same team might not be close to each other, they contribute to the same cause and collective narrative.

The shift away from personal narrative means the individual loses some power to affect augmented reality in a collective narrative, but this also has the advantage of making the individual part of something greater than their self. Alex Golub describes the moment of overcoming a group challenge in online games as "a collective accomplishment that creates social solidarity and can even serve as an important moment in the biographies of individual players" (17). Raids in *Pokémon GO* accomplish this by making battling and capturing a rare Pokémon a collective effort that forces players to rely on one another and builds community, even if only temporarily. Similar to what Golub notes with the biographies of individual players, the personal narrative of a character can be shaped by what collective narratives that character

has or has not participated in. Some players even define themselves in the game by not participating in collective narratives, and instead creating their own. For example, players who were tired of the fighting between teams Instinct, Mystic, and Valor created their own Team Harmony, a team whose narrative emphasizes balance, harmony, and avoiding conflict with others (Fahey).

Finally, collective narratives can emerge outside of the game as well, often in online forums, blogs, and social media groups where players gather to discuss the game. For example, Geraghty documents how some *Pokémon GO* players gather on forums to share secrets or promote conspiracy theories about the game. In doing so, he argues that they “are attempting to engage with and enhance the metatext (the established game universe, characters and backstories alongside fan fiction and theories) beyond what is allowable in the virtual gaming environment” (6). Another prominent example of collective narrative outside of the game is The Silph Road, the largest grassroots network of *Pokémon GO* players (The Silph Road). The Silph Road is an online hub for players to read the latest game news, connect with other players (including local groups), and access a number of tools that help players play the game and find the Pokémon they want to catch. The Silph Road generates collective stories about the game by allowing players to contribute their experiences and data to the network’s tools and social media, and players that do so become part of a larger community that generates and distributes stories about the game. Both of these examples demonstrate how players are using the flexibility provided by a limited determined narrative to create their own stories and meanings in the game, and to share these with each other. This makes the augmented reality of the game “more tangible, complete and real” (Geraghty 11).

Of the three narrative processes in *Pokémon GO*, collective narrative is the most difficult to contain in a neat description. This is because it blurs distinctions between the individual and the collective: remove the individuals and one loses the collective, but at the same time the collective is more than the sum of individuals. It is also worth noting that collective narratives are not always positive ones. The difficulties that require group play also present a very real possibility of failure, and in failure it is easy for players to get frustrated and blame each other. In such cases the collective narrative is not one of overcoming, but rather one of disjunction and resentment. Collective narratives can and sometimes do fall apart, just as the groups that create them do. Despite these complexities, collective narrative produces shared, distributed identities and stories that are essential in constructing *Pokémon GO*'s augmented reality.

Narrative Realities, Present and Future

The narrative processes of *Pokémon GO* proceed from developers and players, taking the forms of determined, personal, and collective narrative. None of the three narratives ever exists entirely on its own, and each contributes to a player's experience of augmented reality. No player of *Pokémon GO* can completely avoid determined narrative (could they be a player if they didn't play the game?), personal narrative (could a player play without having their own experiences while doing so?), or collective narrative (even alone, aren't players always part of some social system?). Further, if the narratives conflict, such as when players' expectations are dashed, then the experience of the game can become inconsistent in a way that the player finds jarring and unenjoyable (Juul 192). At worst, such conflicts could cause players to cease playing entirely, or at least threaten to do so in forums posts or social media. A coherent and welcoming augmented reality is only possible when determined, personal, and collective narrative flow together.

The narrative construction of augmented reality is significant for several reasons. First, recognizing these narrative processes helps us see how *Pokémon GO* constructs augmented reality and affects its players. The game draws on the determined narrative of a world filled with fictional (and often adorable) monsters, and uses that narrative to promote values of exploration, friendship, and competition. Yet the game keeps this narrative simple in order to allow space for emergent experiences that become personal narratives, and for players to bring their own narratives into the game and make them part of its augmented reality. When players come together in groups this takes on a social dimension and makes augmented reality a shared one that many players can be a part of. These same narrative processes are present in other games and potentially other media as well and help us understand how meaning is created and shared by players and audiences.

Second, the narrative construction of *Pokémon GO* and other augmented realities can reveal a great deal about our cultures. By seeing how players (as individuals and as groups) play in various places, and how they use those experiences to craft their own narratives, we can better account for how we understand ourselves and the worlds around us. Better yet, we can see more clearly how we do these things differently. Our PokéStories provide textual cues of what we value, what we like and dislike, and who we think we are, including all of the attendant ideologies that inform these categories. In other words, by looking at how narratives operate and produce stories in *Pokémon GO*, we can see more clearly which ideas, beliefs, and aesthetics are built into our augmented realities. As a game, *Pokémon GO* excels at this because play has a long history as an interdisciplinary and poetic “cultural probe”—a site where cultural values and contemporary social trends become more apparent and observable (Hjorth and Richardson 7). Its complement here, narrative, is equally interwoven with culture, as Graesser et al. note, “perhaps

the easiest way to understand the mind of a culture is to understand its stories” (229). Together, narrative and play provide a unique and powerful lens for understanding *Pokémon GO* and contemporary popular culture.

Finally, the narrative construction of augmented reality gives us the tools to imagine how we could create augmented realities in different and potentially transformative ways. We could, for example, use narrative as part of a “playful resistance” or “critical play,” reshaping events and our understandings of them to be explicitly antinormative or unexpected (Hjorth and Richardson 10). Many players at the margins are already doing this, engaging in what Edmond Chang calls “queergaming” by challenging the stereotypical and the status quo, and instead building their own narratives and embracing the “heterogeneity of play” (Chang 15). For example, LGBTQ *Pokémon GO* players have developed narratives of one or more of the team leaders (Candela, Blanche, and Spark) being LGBTQ, including that Candela and Blanche are in a relationship, or that Spark is a trans man, or a gay or asexual cisgender man (LGBTQ Video Game Archive). These players are essentially playing with narrative—putting the ludified understanding of narrative into practice to reorganize and reshape their experience of the game and creating their own version of its augmented reality in the process. Of course narrative is no panacea, and augmented realities such as *Pokémon GO* have inherent problems such as the commodification of digital games and the use of players as free labor (Jin 56). Yet narrative can be a place to start, and it can contribute, even if slowly and incrementally, to changing our realities. It does so in *Pokémon GO* and elsewhere by telling us about ourselves, and by giving us the opportunity for “encountering, processing, and testing the present” (Jagoda et al. 75). The narratives of *Pokémon GO* are our stories, and they can reveal parts of who we are, how we play, and what we can imagine.

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Chapter 3

Playing with Playthroughs: Visualization and Narrative Form in Video Games

It was a rainy fall night in October 2014. I finally sat down to play the game *P.T.* (7780s Studio 2014), a survival horror game that games media had widely publicized in the past couple months.¹² I sat on my couch in the dark—perhaps not the wisest decision—and began to play. In the game I found myself in a dimly-lit hallway. I looked around at the different objects it contained, such as pictures, notes, a phone, and a radio, and paused for a while on a door eerily cracked open, until it suddenly slammed shut. I reached the end of the hallway eventually and opened the door there to find myself in the exact same hallway. This happened each time I opened that door, and each time I encountered copies of the hallway with changes ranging from the small (an object in a different place) to the major (suddenly the entire hallway was red with flashing and spinning lights). Finally I got stuck: I seemed to be encountering the same version of the hallway over and over, and nothing seemed to change. I looked up guides and walkthroughs for the game to figure out what I was missing and learned that I needed to do *something* to get the in-game phone to ring, though no one seemed to know what that something was. So I started trying everything I could: interacting with every item, walking down the hallway backwards, and turning the radio on and off countless times. I even tried whispering into the PlayStation 4 microphone, per a Reddit suggestion, but still the phone didn't ring. I'm still not sure what I did to trigger the phone-ringing event—perhaps the game just pitied me for taking so long to figure it out.

¹² *P.T.* stands for Playable Teaser. It was supposed to be the teaser for the next game in the Silent Hill series, *Silent Hills*, but was scrapped by Konami in 2015. The game was created by Kojima Productions under the pseudonym 7780s Studio, and published by Konami.

This brief narration of my experience with *P.T.* is an illustration of a larger point, namely that players have different experiences and thus different stories in the games they play. On the one hand, my story is unique. No one else has had my exact experience of playing *P.T.* in my apartment, navigating *P.T.*'s hallway, encountering the game's events (some randomly generated), or getting stuck where I did. On the other hand, my story is quite common in that all players of *P.T.* have their own versions of it. While we all encountered different parts of the game at different times and in different ways, there are still many images, objects, events, and feelings that we all experienced sooner or later. This shared-but-varied phenomenon in game narrative is the result of player interaction with the game and is both afforded and limited by what the game system (hardware, software, interfaces, etc.) and the players themselves make possible. Games achieve a sense of individuality through interaction by accommodating (intentionally or otherwise) a wide variety of play styles and choices and must allow players to make different decisions and play differently in order to keep the game interesting (Atkins 5). Matthew Miller, one of the creators of the MMORPG *City of Heroes*, describes this dilemma: "We wanted players to have unique experiences as they played through the game, so that when a group of players got together, they could talk about [their exploits], and it wouldn't be identical to everyone else in the room" (Miller 125). Play demands the freedom and potential for difference, and as players navigate games they create their own unique (and yet similar) narratives.

Of course game studies scholars have long noted that the player's ability to affect a narrative through gameplay is the defining characteristic of game narratives.¹³ In this framework, game developers and theorists such as Chris Crawford have often discussed interactivity as something of a problem for game narrative and experience, even going so far as to say that there is an "apparent incompatibility between plot and interactivity" (Crawford 51). The issue that Crawford and others have identified is that narratives need to have structure and coherence on some level, whereas interactivity and play are more about the flowing emergence of possibilities that often buck against the limitations of narrative's structure. This tension, while not insurmountable, is why we seem to be less likely or willing to call a sequence of representations a narrative the more variable that sequence is. Thus when gamers discussing the same game relate drastically different experiences with the same content, such as puzzles and bosses solved or beaten differently; different paths taken or choices made; or even entirely different characters and plots, we're less likely to call that content narrative. The reality of shifting and unstable content poses a difficulty for games scholars of all sorts (players are always doing unexpected things) but is particularly challenging for those attempting to locate central themes, meanings, and stories in a given game and play experience. How does one begin to account for all of these possibilities for variation? Or, to put it another way, how does one stabilize a game's narrative enough to begin to make claims about it, without ignoring the emergent qualities of that narrative?

¹³ See especially Marie-Laure Ryan's work with game narrative (Ryan "Story/Worlds/Media"). See also Eric Zimmerman's commentary on the concepts (Zimmerman 154). For the most prominent discussions of player interactivity and narrative, see Murray and Aarseth.

Previously, the options for dealing with these questions were largely limited to acknowledging their existence. Most scholars working with game narrative, including those already mentioned, have generalized the issue of divergent player experience by pointing to the possibilities for it, and perhaps exploring a few of those major possibilities in a given genre or game. At best, some scholars have utilized social scientific methods for player interviews, forums research, and community studies to understand how different players engage with and interpret a game.¹⁴ These studies are extremely valuable in how they account for the player's role in game narrative and experience, but they are also limited by sample sizes and what players remember or are consciously aware of in their gameplay. Such issues are largely unavoidable and are not a significant detriment to the studies. However we have yet to develop a method that allows for the assessment of moment-to-moment experiences in a game, including both what is common to different player's playthroughs and what is different. In other words, while we have many theories that acknowledge how narrative is interactive and variable in games and other media, we have only begun to assess the types and amounts of variance that are possible in particular game genres and individual games. One way to start doing this is to examine recordings of different players' playthroughs of the same games, such as Let's Play videos on YouTube and other streaming services. As Roth et al. note, these videos are "qualitative samples for the evaluation of the interactive narrative user experience" that have hereto been ignored in game narrative scholarship (Roth 12).

This article provides a new method for using video recordings of gameplay to study similarity, difference, and variation in narrative caused by player interaction. It does so utilizing

¹⁴ The list of such scholars is extensive, and spans disciplines including Anthropology and Communications. Examples include Bonnie Nardi, Tom Boellstorff, and Adrienne Shaw, to name only a prominent few.

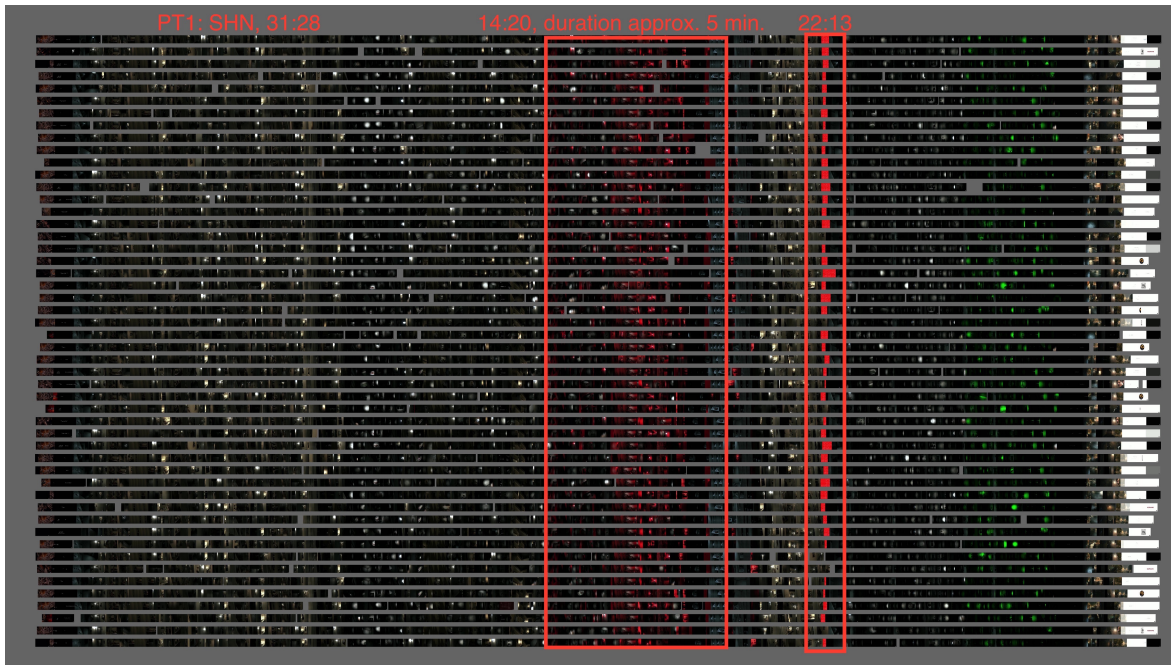


Figure 9. PT1, an imageplot of a playthrough of *P.T.* Red boxes added to highlight particular sections of the playthrough.

emerging digital humanities tools for distance visualization of visual media, such as the ImagePlot macro for ImageJ. ImagePlot is software that takes a collection of images and plots those images on a basic graph where the x and y axes correspond to different, quantifiable characteristics of the images. I will explain this process and its affordances and limitations in more depth shortly, but for now note that ImagePlot allows for the analysis of many types of visual media, including paintings, photographs, film, and of course video games. For the purpose of visualizing narrative variation in games, ImagePlot allows one to take a video recording of gameplay, extract the images from it, and plot those on a graph so an entire playthrough of a game is visible in one image (Figure 9). This distance visualization allows for storing, representing, and analyzing player experiences on a scale previously impossible: one can view players' entire playthroughs of a game, and compare tens or hundreds of them at a time. Further, rather than relying on player experience abstracted from actual play or reported from memory afterward, this distance visualization relies on video recording of play as it happened. By plotting

the images extracted from the playthroughs of games by different players, one can begin to trace the how variable a given game's play experiences can be. A comparison of playthrough imageplots reveals the exact what and when of similarities or differences between a large number of player experiences with the same game. The imageplots also connect with exact measures of time and image qualities (such as brightness, hue, or even objects in the images), allowing the assessment of the magnitude of difference in a game, and providing some answers as to how variable the variability of a game's narrative and play is. This article will focus specifically on variance in time (at what point players encounter something, and how long it takes them to play) and sign (what players encounter, the content of the images in the imageplot).

Developing these methods and answering the question of how variable a game's narrative is presents an opportunity to reconsider narrative form. Despite attempts to expand narrative in recent decades, such as the theories that space itself is narrative or that human perception of reality is dependent on narrative, the concept of narrative has remained limited to being a linear or at best multilinear form.¹⁵ Even scholars of cognitive narrative processes such as David Herman and Marie-Laure Ryan, whose theories of narrative emphasize how it generates "possible worlds" with many potential outcomes, have yet to account for how much difference and variation is possible in narrative experience, interpretation, and construction (Herman). It has remained difficult to assess just how much is possible in making possible worlds, or how far a narrative can change or stretch before it becomes either another narrative entirely or something unrecognizable as narrative. Yet if we can build on these theories of interactivity and possible difference by focusing more on specific lived experiences and instances of variation, we can

¹⁵ For recent work on the narrative construction of space, see Ryan, *Narrating Space/Spatializing Narrative*. The most prominent work on the narrative construction of reality comes from Bruner, "The Narrative Construction of Reality."

arrive at an understanding of narrative form that is less focused on linear or multilinear outcomes and more attentive to the procedural and emergent construction of narrative similarities and differences. Such an understanding of narrative would emphasize the relationality of signs and open up room for their change and motion, rather than seeking to fix them in set times, places, and interpretations.¹⁶ Shira Chess points toward this potential in her theorization of video game narratives as queer narratives that forego normative teleological structures of climax; instead games present narratives that are non-reproductive and continuous (Chess 84). Imageplots furthers the conception of narrative as an ongoing, shifting, and possibly queer process by visualizing narrative as it unfolds and providing a means of assessing difference and continuity throughout the playing of a game.

In pushing us to consider narrative as an active and changeable form that requires play and emergence, the imageplots and the distance visualization they provide contribute a method to the renewed discourse on forms, perhaps best captured in Caroline Levine's *Forms*. Levine defines form as "all shapes and configurations, all ordering principles, all patterns of repetition and difference," and goes on to say that narrative is the form that best captures how different forms "collide": "the strange encounter between two or more forms that sometimes reroutes intention and ideology" (Levine 3, 20). The collisions in forms that Levine identifies are observable in the play of similarities and differences in player experiences that are captured in imageplots. As players encounter content in a game, their actions affect the form of that content—its duration, its arrangement, and its relation to other forms in the game. Imageplots capture the effects of this interactivity in the form of visual signs and suggest that narrative in

¹⁶ I'm referring to signs here in terms of the visual semiotics theorized by film and comics scholars, such as Christian Metz's *Film language: a semiotics of the cinema* and Neil Cohn's *The Visual Language of Comics*.

games is best understood as a particular sequence or arrangement of moving and colliding signs. The signs that are common to all playthroughs of a game can be taken together as the primary or central narrative of the game: they are the core experience that causes the game to cohere as one game, one system of rules and possibilities for players to play with. The signs that are different from playthrough to playthrough indicate the places and parts of the game where the player can deviate from the central narrative and create their own unique experience of it. Taken together, the differences reveal how variable that narrative is, or how much play there is to it: more differences mean greater opportunity for play and variation, and fewer differences mean less.

The overarching goal of the distance analysis method proposed here is to locate patterns in the visual signs between playthroughs, and to thereby identify both the common and different meanings, experiences, and possibilities in a game. To return to the problem of the player and game narrative, this means being able to establish a central narrative to a game that is not limited to the game's scripted elements but can also accommodate player input and individual experience. This method can provide new insights on how players influence game narrative, and what degree of emergence comes with that influence. Furthermore, such a study of game narrative can at last start to move game studies and narrative theory beyond accounting for interactivity and variation in mere abstraction, and gain a more solid grasp of narrative as a form that is flexible, emergent, and yet limited, always in a playful relationship with its audience. By doing so, we can better perceive the possibilities for difference that exist in current games, and how we might play within games and other visual media in order to produce new and transformative narratives. If we can see narrative forms in a given text, then we can better understand how those forms operate, and what we can do with them.



Figure 10. An imageplot of another playthrough of *P.T.* by a different player. Red box added to highlight game section common to all playthroughs.

Imageplots as Visual Archives

This opportunity to rethink visual narrative form is made possible by ImagePlot, a macro for the software ImageJ, which is usually used for the analysis of large quantities of images (such as brain scans) in medical science. ImageJ is developed and updated by the National Institutes of Health, and the software allows for a variety of plugins and macros for different types of image analysis. ImagePlot is one such macro, and was created by a team led by Lev Manovich as part of the Software Studies Initiative.¹⁷ ImagePlot takes a collection of images and plots it on a graph according to preset data points. For example, the imageplots included here are plotted with a x-axis of time, and a randomly generated y-axis (Figure 10, Appendix).¹⁸ In effect, this means

¹⁷ The Software Studies Initiative is a research lab with locations at The Graduate Center at CUNY and UCSD. According to their website they work on the analysis of “big cultural datasets”, including data visualization. For more information, see <http://lab.softwarestudies.com>

¹⁸ The randomly generated y-axis ensures that the images do not stack up on top of each other, so it makes it easier to see all of the images from a particular moment in a video.

that the imageplots represent the temporal progression of images in the collection, or in other words they present the images in the order that they appear in the video. Each column on the graph contains images from the same moment in the video, and the progression of columns mirrors the progression of the video, with the left side of the imageplot being the beginning of the video and the right side its end. This mapping of images onto a graph provides a distance visualization of a video, allowing one to change the scale of the data and see all of the video at once, instead of only seeing individual parts of the video at a time. In this sense, ImagePlot is similar to many other digital humanities tools (such as those used for network analysis, topic modeling, etc.) that help us zoom out from a particular moment in a text or corpus and see larger trends across many moments and texts. ImagePlot allows us to do the same for visual media, and this method is only one of its many potential applications in the analysis of photos, paintings, film, and video games.

This project uses ImagePlot to visualize entire playthroughs of video games, such as *P.T.*, the game I narrated earlier. The process does not require any coding knowledge, but rather involves using a series of files in conjunction with ImageJ. In order to run the ImagePlot macro, one first needs a collection of images and an associated file or spreadsheet with the necessary data, including the filenames of the images. To generate these, a collection of video files were downloaded from YouTube, where each video is a complete playthrough of a game recorded and posted online. Next, images were extracted from the videos, and organized in the same folder. A data spreadsheet was populated with the filenames, and each image was assigned a random y-value. Finally, ImagePlot was used in ImageJ with the collection of images and spreadsheet to plot the images on a graph. In sum, one could describe the process as extracting the images, organizing the images, and then plotting the images. This entire process is in every way mediated

by software, and the end result is a particular form of data and knowledge quite different from simply watching a video of a playthrough on YouTube. ImagePlot and ImageJ thus fit into a larger technological trend that Manovich identifies as software creating new media, which he defines as “a combination of particular techniques for generation, editing and accessing content” (Manovich 335). Imageplots are a new way of viewing and accessing existing media through distance visualization, and in this regard they are a form of new media. Yet they are also their own new form of content, making ImagePlot and ImageJ (the software that creates them) new media as well.

The imageplots included primarily come from one game—*P.T.*— in the survival horror genre, which tasks players with playing and surviving while being frightened by horror graphics and settings. I have limited my analysis to one game and one genre in order to isolate narrative variation coming from player interaction and experience, rather than coming from the differences between different games or game genres. While any game genre could work for this analysis, I selected the survival horror genre for its tendency to limit player actions in order to create a sense of fear. Survival horror games often take place in constrained spaces and provide few options for players in order to keep them on set paths and force confrontation—after all, monsters are not as scary if one can completely avoid them (Chien 64). As such, survival horror games have hypothetically fewer variations between playthroughs, making those variations more consistent and noticeable. I selected *P.T.* in particular because it is a uniquely excellent case study for narrative variation due to its content and cultural context. *P.T.* is an abbreviation of Playable Teaser, and was originally intended, as its name suggests, as a teaser for a new *Silent Hill* game being directed by Hideo Kojima (perhaps most famous for the *Metal Gear* franchise). The game is relatively short, containing only about an hour’s worth of play time, and consists of

repeatedly exploring the same hallway in a dark house with different encounters on each repeat. Thus repetition and variation are inherent to the game's structure and narrative, and the game provides an exemplary space for using those concepts to measure player interactivity and differences between playthroughs.

The playthroughs of *P.T.* visualized in these imageplots are taken from various YouTube videos and Twitch.tv streams and include playthroughs by popular streamers and regular players. There are a large number of them available, mostly due to *P.T.*'s notoriety—after Konami cancelled the upcoming *Silent Hill* game and removed access to *P.T.* in April 2015, the game became an instant cult classic. Each playthrough plotted is a complete playing of *P.T.*, in some cases accompanied by visuals associated with the YouTube channel at the beginning or end of the video. I have specifically excluded playthroughs that are heavily edited, as the additional visual elements added to those playthroughs introduce a bias toward similarity in the images. Heavy editing or removal of parts of the play experience also defeats the purpose of capturing and visualizing actual play, and instead creates its own entertainment media further removed from the game itself. Three of the playthroughs contain images of the player superimposed on the gameplay (as with many Twitch.tv streams), but in the resulting imageplots the images from the player cameras are small enough to be unnoticeable without zooming in.

There are several limitations to this process worth mentioning before diving into analyzing the imageplots. First, the ability to produce imageplots of game playthroughs is limited by having (or not having) access to video recordings of the game in question. This means that because less popular games have fewer recorded playthroughs available on YouTube or Twitch.tv, it is harder to produce many imageplots of them to compare. Even if one sets out to produce their own recordings, there are still constraints of time and hard drive space that make it

difficult to create many playthroughs to use. An additional challenge is finding complete playthroughs of a game that are not cut into smaller sections on YouTube, though one can get around this by splicing the smaller videos together into complete playthroughs for plotting. The length of a game is also potentially a limiting factor, as complete playthroughs of many games are significantly longer than the average playthrough of *P.T.*, and take more time and computing resources to plot.

In order for the use and comparison of imageplots to be meaningful, careful attention to the type and source of the playthroughs that generate them is required. On the most basic level this means identifying exactly what the plotting of images is revealing regarding the relationship between data points. To put it another way, ImagePlot is perfectly capable of generating very interesting imageplots that contain very little meaning and insight for the analysis of the object they are plotting. An imageplot of the brightness and hue of a game reveals very little about that game's narrative structure, and likewise an imageplot of time yields only the most basic observations of color usage in a game. Thus one must ensure that what one plots with ImagePlot matches the questions they are asking. This project focuses on questions of narrative variation in games, so the imageplots included here all deal with time, signs, and narrative structure. I have chosen not to plot the games according to qualities like hue, saturation, or brightness because all of the playthroughs being plotted are of the same games, so plotting those qualities would yield similar (if not identical) results.

The imageplots that result from this process are distance visualizations of players' playthroughs of a particular game, and as such they effectively provide an archive of player experiences in that game. When looking at an imageplot of a playthrough, one can see everything that a player did in that game from start to finish. This means one can see both the

player's choices and actions, and the game system and environments in which they took place. Imageplots are thus excellent examples of archives as Foucault defines them: as "the general system of the formation and transformation of statements" and "the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events" (Foucault 129-130). The archive as "system" is key to Foucault's understanding here; it is the system that actually produces the objects it contains. In terms of the *P.T.* imageplots of this project, the archive is the system of the game and the player: together they fashion the player's experiences, encounters, and interactions (their "statements") with images while playing. Plotting these images creates distance visualizations that are objects of the archive: they are produced by the game system, and also record that system's possibilities.

Conceptualizing the imageplots of *P.T.* playthroughs as archival objects helps clarify their relationship to the game and their significance for analysis, but it does not explain how they function. In order to understand how imageplots operate and capture play, one can consider them as diagrams, drawing on the idea of the diagram as explained by Deleuze in his reading of Foucault. Deleuze quotes Foucault in saying that a diagram is more than an image, it is "a functioning, abstracted from any obstacle," "a map, a cartography," "a machine that is almost blind and mute," and "a spatio-temporal multiplicity" (Deleuze 34). In essence, to Deleuze and Foucault a diagram is a frozen image that still contains motion and possibility in their purest, most ideal (and thus stillest) forms. Imageplots of game playthroughs are static images, yet they are images of play—they are snapshots of a system in operation, and evidence of that system's potential. As such, they constitute diagrams of play. Each imageplot maps out a play experience with all of its movement and variation, yet the recording and plotting of images arrests and captures these same forces. The overall diagram of a given game is constantly changing according to the player, and yet the archive of the game imposes limits on this variation as well.

Within this conceptual framework, this project is a construction of an archive of diagrams that contain the multiplicity of play possibilities, and that thus enable a tracing of the limits of interactivity and emergence in a game's narrative and play.

ImagePlot provides a new methodology for assessing play experiences on a scale previously impossible. The imageplots of *P.T.* demonstrate how this method works, and what we can learn from it about narrative form.

Variance in Time

While there are many types of variance between the playthroughs that emerge in the imageplots, the observable differences in narrative form between playthroughs fall into two broad categories. The first type of variability is variance in time, measured in both the duration of particular content in a game and in points in time when an individual player reaches a specific part of the game. The different times of the playthroughs reveal how their respective players engage with *P.T.*, including how factors like skill, experience, and intent specifically affect the playing of the game and the experience of the game's narrative. Measuring time in a playthrough using imageplot also reveals how variable the durations of particular game events are, and establishes how long a portion of the narrative is for an average player.

In order to measure variation, however, one first needs something to measure from. The points of similarity and sameness between imageplots are therefore a crucial place to start, and thankfully they are also some of the most immediately apparent aspects of them. All of the playthrough imageplots are plotted to be the same size, regardless of the amount of overall time each one visualizes. In effect this means that an imageplot of a shorter playthrough, such as PT3

(00:29:44), is visually similar to a longer playthrough such as PT5 (00:51:11).¹⁹ While this effaces the visualization of exact time, it is helpful for the comparison of time relative to different overall playtimes. In other words, one can see that events happen at relatively the same place in the playthroughs of PT3 and PT5, even if they happen at different time markers. Establishing that relative sameness between playthroughs then enables the observation and analysis of the variance created by player interactivity. Furthermore, one can interpret the similarities between imageplots as the visualization of the game's basic structure and narrative—the common foundation that the game provides and all players experience.

The most obvious example of variation in time in the playthroughs is the fact that every playthrough has a different overall playtime. Of the ten playthroughs plotted here, the longest one (PT10) has a playtime of 1:24:50, and the shortest one (PT9) is 0:20:00 long.²⁰ At first glance there appears to be a wide discrepancy between the two that would indicate the possibility for almost infinite variation, but taken together with the other playthroughs some clear trends emerge. For example, the average time of all the playthroughs is 0:39:22, with a standard deviation of 00:18:12. This means that 67% of the playthroughs in this dataset fall between 00:21:10 and 00:57:34 in playtime, and that that range of time accounts for the majority of play experiences with *P.T.* Of course there is still the possibility for outliers of longer or shorter playtime (including PT9 and PT 10 already mentioned), and the addition of more data would inevitably alter these numbers. Yet these playthroughs seem fairly representative of extent available playthroughs on YouTube and Twitch.tv, and perhaps even of player experiences not present through those platforms. As such, data collected from these playthroughs reveals a

¹⁹ For comparisons between figures, please consult the Figures section at the end of the article.

²⁰ For the purpose of clarity, I refer to all times in hh:mm:ss format.

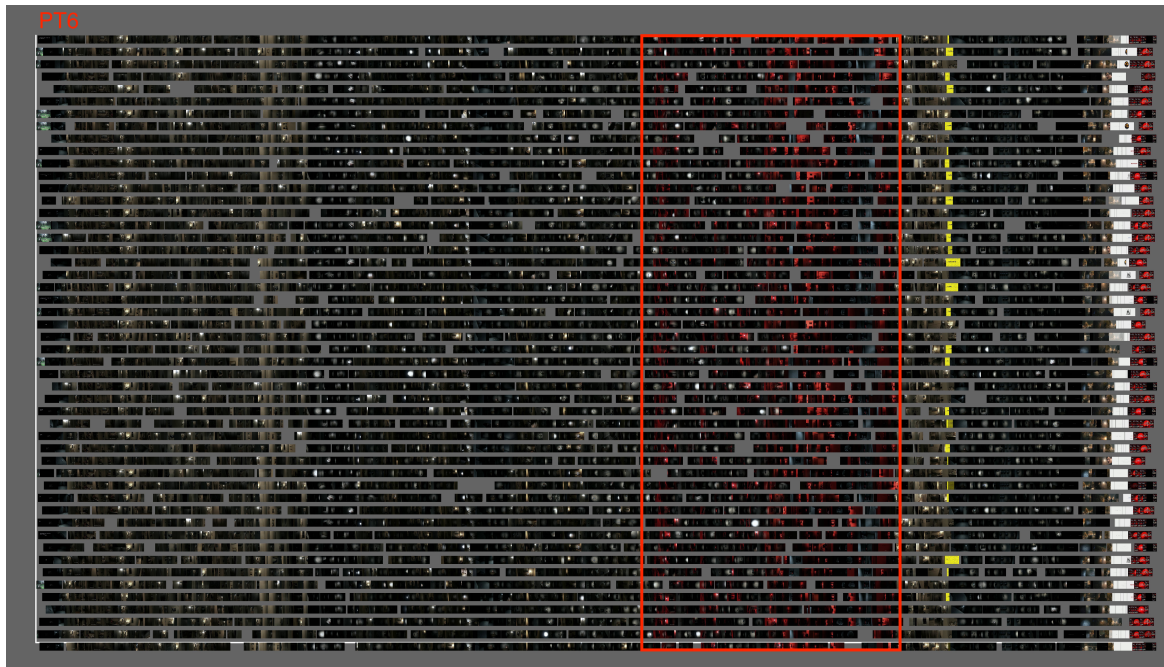


Figure 11. PT6, including *P.T.*'s red hallway segment, highlighted in red.

measure of how player interactivity shapes playtime on average, which affects narrative time and experience in *P.T.* A player who spends more time in an area will have a fuller experience of that area, and likely uncover parts of the game narrative that a player who spends less time there might miss. In this way variance in time is intricately linked with variance in sign covered in the next section.

Beyond measuring the overall length of a playthrough, imageplots also indicate the specific times when players encounter different parts of a game. In *P.T.* the most prominent example of this is an iteration of the hallway that is tinted red, and is common to every playthrough and corresponding imageplot (Figure 11). Even without measuring the exact time the player reaches this version of the hallway, the imageplots show that there is a general variance in the time different players do so. Most of the players reached this point at roughly halfway through their playthroughs, but imageplots PT2, PT6, and PT7 locate the red hallway closer to the end of the game. PT6 is especially noteworthy in this regard, and the brevity of the

playthrough after the red hallway is surprising when compared to the overall playtime, which was actually longer than average (00:40:00). It may be that the player in PT6 was more familiar with the later parts of the game, and was able to complete them quickly. In any case, PT2, PT6, and PT7 reveal that time in the later stages of *P.T.* is especially variable in ways that it is not in the first half of the game. This variance in playtime is actually significant in the narrative as well. The versions of the hallway found in the first half of the game are relatively stable in terms of time and space—there are no tints to the lighting, the player moves at normal speed, and overall experience is more realistic (to the extent that that is possible in a world with strange monsters and supernatural occurrences). Yet all of this changes as *P.T.* progresses, and the game’s space and time begin to break down in the sections where playtime becomes most variable. The imageplots thus reveal that the narrative themes of *P.T.* are present even on the levels of game structure and playtime. This suggests that narrative and play are not as readily separable as game scholars have hereto thought, but rather that they are constantly interwoven in the experience of a game.

Potential explanations for the time differences between the playthroughs are found in the individual player’s level of experience with the game, their playstyle, and their intentions for recording their play experience. While it is difficult to account for all of these factors of player experience with a game without contacting them, the way the player describes their playthrough can provide some answers. Four of the *P.T.* playthroughs included here (PT1, PT3, PT4, PT6) have been labeled “Walkthroughs” by their players, indicating that they show viewers the correct way to play and complete the game. As a result, one can assume that these players have played the game before, and know each part of it well enough to provide the walkthrough. In contrast, the other six playthroughs are variations of the “Let’s Play” format on YouTube and Twitch.tv,

which usually has players playing a game for the first time for an audience (sometimes with commentary). The lack of player experience in Let's Plays relative to Walkthroughs means that playtimes in the former are on average longer, though not drastically so: the average playtime for the six Let's Plays was 0:41:45, and the average for Walkthroughs was 0:35:47, with a difference between them of 0:05:58. These numbers indicate that while experience and intention do have an effect on variation in playtime, they alone do not fully explain it. The relatively small difference between Walkthroughs and Let's Plays also may suggest that there is a central narrative and experience to a game that averages can help trace.

Experience and intention are by no means the only possible explanations of time variation, but unfortunately imageplots do not (and cannot) account for all factors. For examples, players in different playthroughs may have been distracted by other things happening in their personal environments while playing, thus delaying their progress. Some players also may have more experience with different games of that are similar to *P.T.*, making them more familiar with the game's conventions and better able to navigate them. Finally, players also may have played with different hardware setups that could subtly lengthen or shorten their playtime (this is especially common with older games like *Silent Hill 2*). These and other possibilities do not appear directly in the imageplots, and because of this it is impossible to account for them without additional information. Future work with ImagePlot and playthroughs could remedy this with more direct contact with players, or by adding methods for analyzing the images from player cameras found in some playthroughs.

Imageplots of another game in the Silent Hill franchise, *Silent Hill: Downpour* (Vatra Games 2012), provides useful comparisons, both to other games in the series and to games with more room for exploration than *P.T.*. *Silent Hill: Downpour* was advertised as containing

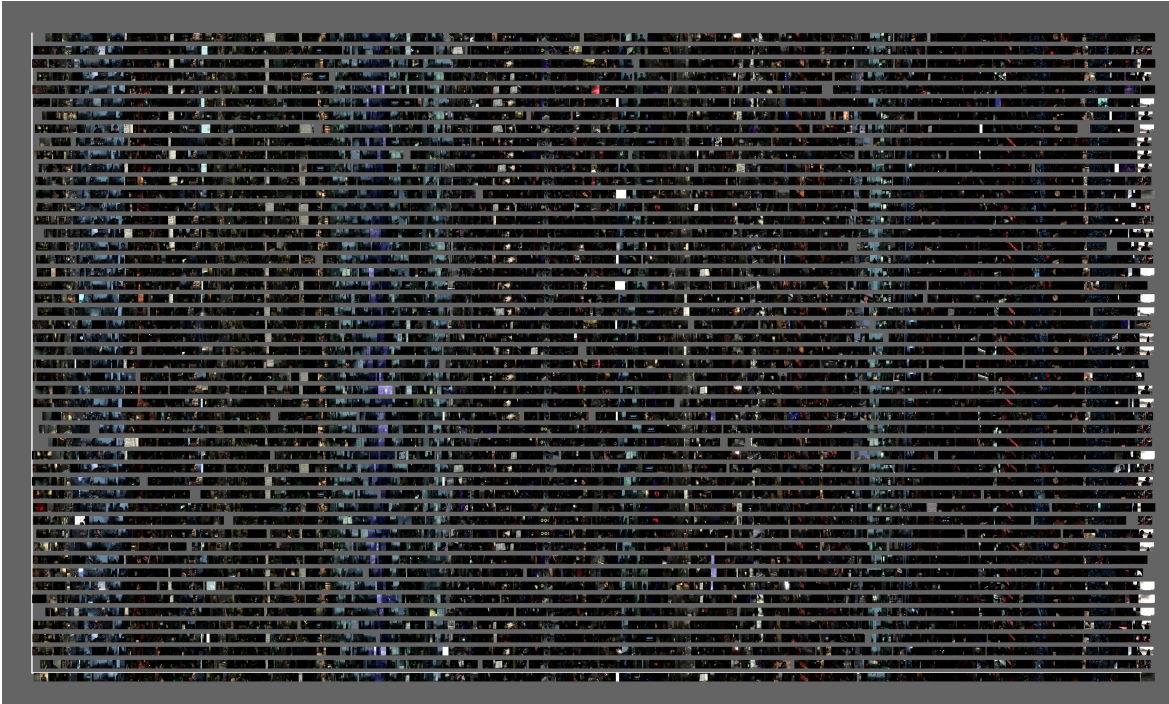


Figure 12. SHD1, an imageplot of a playthrough of *Silent Hill: Downpour*.

discoverable and variable content, largely to promote its replayability. The imageplots of *Downpour* are of very different playthroughs: SHD1 is a regular playthrough of the game with a playtime of 4:59:19, and SHD2 is a speedrun (where players attempt the shortest playtime possible) with a playtime of 2:52:20 (Figure 12). Interestingly, the two imageplots reveal fewer points of relative comparison between the playthroughs than with *P.T.*, indicating that there is much more time variance in more open games like *Downpour*. Presumably this is due to the presence of more content, meaning differences in playstyle will accumulate greater time differences by the end of the game. More importantly, this demonstrates how it is more difficult to locate a central narrative and player experience in longer games with more choices and player interactivity. It is not that a central narrative is not present, but rather that that central narrative becomes obfuscated by the optional content interwoven with it. As seen in the imageplots, the

narrative diffuses across the variability created by player interactivity, and the measures of variance in playtime (average, standard deviation, etc.) become looser as a result.

The durations and times captured by the imageplots are the results of thousands of moments of gameplay, and each moment presents the possibility for at least slightly different choices and actions on the part of the player. In this sense, the temporality of the imageplots is directly related to the multiplicity of emergent possibilities that are present in gameplay, and now captured in distance visualization. This suggests that the temporality of game narrative and play is inextricable from its emergent capabilities, similar to the temporality of cybernetics and neural nets described by Orit Halpern. Halpern writes, “the temporality of the net is preemptive, it always operates in the future perfect tense, but without necessarily defined endpoints or contexts. Nets are about $T+1$ ” (Halpern loc 3114). Time in systems like nets or games operates on sets of uncertain future conditions, meaning that each moment in a game opens on new possibilities for emergence and alteration. The accumulation of these moments as seen in the imageplots accounts for measurable differences in time between playthroughs. They also involve the second category of difference: variance in content, or sign.

Variance in Sign

Beyond encountering objects at different times or in different places, players can also simply encounter different objects. There are several prominent examples of this in the *P.T.* playthroughs, including encounters that are similar (like the red hallway already mentioned), those that are similar and different (every player encounters a crash screen, but there are different crash screens), and those that are entirely different (such as a jump scare only some players encounter). The presence or absence of these events in a playthrough alters a player’s experience of the game, including their perception of the game’s narrative. I refer to these differing

experiences of content as variance in sign because they involve the presence, absence, or rearranging of visual, auditory, and haptic signs that affect the game's narrative.

While the red hallway, the crash screen, and the jump scare could each be fruitful moments for close analysis, I will only cover them briefly here for their significance to narrative structure and variance in games.²¹ The red hallway is perhaps the most immediately apparent similarity between all of the *P.T.* playthroughs, and the imageplots reveal that it varies more in its location in time than it does in its form. This does not mean that its form is not significant—if anything it means quite the opposite. The form and meaning of the red hallway are crucial to the progression of the story, as evidenced in the fact that every player must encounter it. The red hallway is where the reality of *P.T.*'s game world begins to bend and break, evident in how time speeds up in that version of the hallway and many of the normal objects are replaced with abstract and nightmarish versions of themselves. For example, all of the paintings and family pictures in the red hallway are replaced with images of flashing and revolving lights. This warping of the game's reality is crucial to the central narrative of the game and its conclusion: as the player discovers more and more about a series of grizzly murders, their first-person experience of the game's environments becomes increasingly unstable, representing a growing psychosis. The red hallway is a breaking point in this process, and every player must encounter it in much the same way.

The imageplots demonstrate how the game seems to return to normal after the red hallway by presenting players a brightly lit version of the hallway. However the player quickly

²¹ This points to another basic use of imageplots, however—they can be used to identify important moments of similarity and difference for the purpose of close analysis.

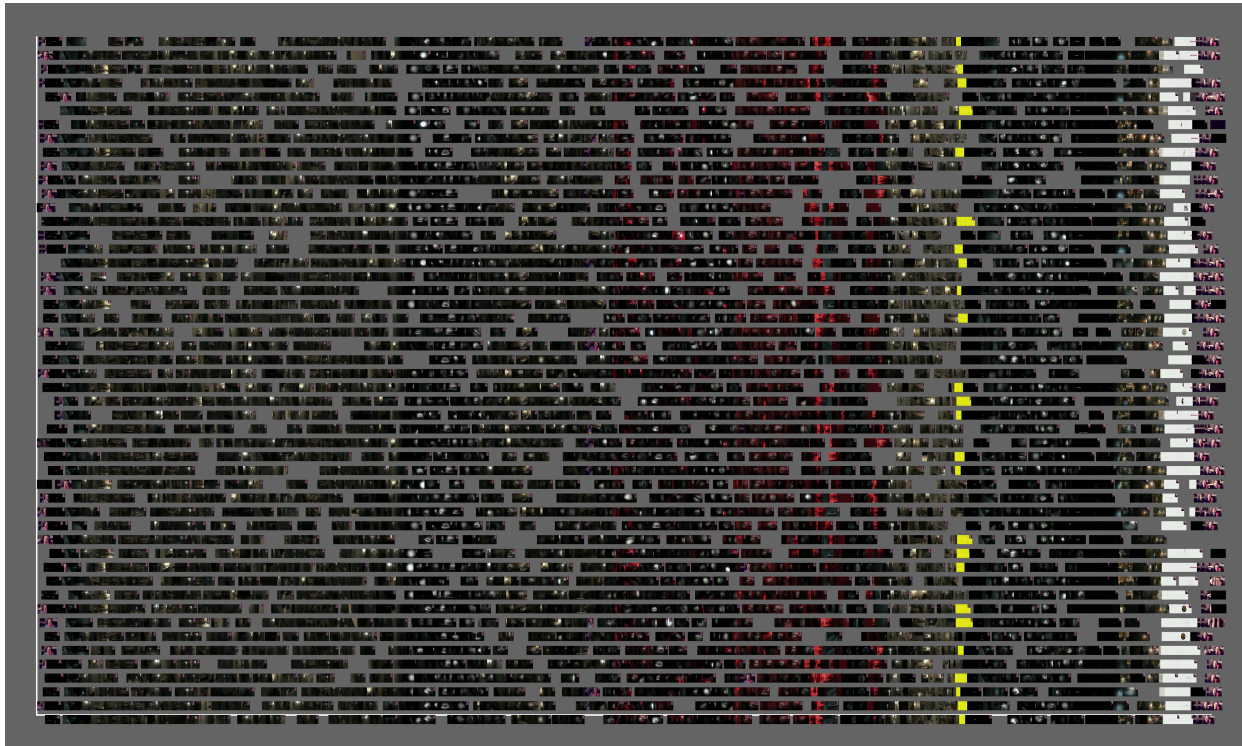


Figure 13. PT7, with the yellow crash screen visible.

notices that the screen seems to break and glitch as they move around, and eventually the game seems to crash. Every player encounters the crash screen, indicating its significance as a moment of complete breakage in the game's reality. Yet the type, color, and message of the crash screen varies, including red, yellow, white, and black versions of the screen seen in PT9, PT7, and PT2 (Figure 13. The black version in PT9 can be hard to distinguish from the other dark images of the imageplots without zooming in). The variance in the crash screen's form introduces the possibility for different meaning and interpretation depending on the version the player encounters. Examples of the message on the screen include "I'm heading there [to hell] now," "Development halted due to inexplicable bug," and "I'll call later." Which screen the player sees alters the meaning of the central narrative, creating a story of paranormal horror, a metafiction about game development, or other potential interpretations.

Finally, some occurrences are limited to individual experiences, and are different on every playthrough of a game. For example, the player in *P.T.* is haunted throughout the game by Lisa, the ghost of a murdered wife from the radio reports that the player hears. However the encounters with Lisa are randomly generated, and there is a jump scare where Lisa attacks the player character and breaks their neck that only some players experience (occurring roughly half way through PT6). If this happens to a player, that player must start the entire cycle of looping hallways over again. The addition of these signs serve the same function as most jump scares: to frighten the player with sudden action. Yet they also alter the game's narrative by changing the individual experience of the player, introducing elements of failure and becoming trapped in the seemingly endless hallway. Rather than being entirely secondary or separate, the variance of even a small number of optional and random signs can significantly affect a game's central narrative.

The differences in signs between the playthroughs and imageplots of *P.T.* reveal the especially performative and playful nature of signs in games, which contributes to the overall mutability of narrative form in the medium. Each image or object in a game is a sign that the player interacts with—receiving it, interpreting it, deploying it, altering it, etc. This understanding is not new; C.S. Pierce recognized a similar interactivity with signs in identifying what he calls the “interpretant” of a sign, a mirror sign created in the mind of an individual encountering a sign (Pierce 99). Yet visual signs such as those found in games function somewhat differently from linguistic signs, and they operate by what Johanna Drucker calls distinct “basic codes of visual form” (Drucker 42). Drucker describes these basic codes as forms such as lines, shapes, and movement, and all of these are certainly present in games (Drucker 43). Games are their own visual form, however, and their visual signs have media-specific codes as well. For example,

objects in games are often marked by specific game symbols or highlighting to notify the player that the object is interactive. Similarly, the layout of space and objects can give players visual cues for what to do there, or in other words how to play. These visual signs are basic codes particular to games, and are essential to how players navigate and play with game narrative. ImagePlot is capable of capturing the various outcomes or traces of these codes and players' interactions with them, and in this sense an imageplot is itself an indexical sign of player activity in game. The relationship between an imageplot and player activity is indicative of how visual signs in games are often directly linked to functional purposes, and interacting with them during gameplay is a performance of meaning with variable and emergent outcomes.²²

The visual and playful signs present in an imageplot become further legible with the help of film semiotics. Film scholars such as Jean Mitry have theorized the relationship between visual and linguistic signs since the 1980s and have noted that different types of signs can have similar structures while functioning differently: “any likeness exists in the structures not in the forms” (Mitry 24). Just as there are important differences between signs in film and language, there are also differences between signs in film and signs in games. One such difference is the fact that the player takes on an active role in the construction of signs in games. With *P.T.*, for example, it is up to the player to interpret the signs in the game and interact with them in the correct ways and sequences in order to progress. Because different players perform this role differently, there is variance in time and sign between imageplots of the same game when there isn't for imageplots of the same film. Christian Metz's concept of the “imaginary signifier” further explains the player's role and presence in the imageplots. In short, in film the imaginary

²² In terms of semiotics, this is the idea that the relationship between signifier and signified with a visual sign is not arbitrary, as it often is with linguistic signs. See Saussure.

signifier is the transparent or absent signifier that nonetheless represents the viewer in the film, acting as their “prosthesis for [their] primally dislocated limbs” (Metz 4). A similar phenomenon takes place with player characters in games, particularly first person games like *P.T.*, where the camera mimics the player’s first person experience of reality and the player character is not shown on screen. The physical embodiment of the player is nowhere represented in an imageplot, yet their presence in the form of their choices, actions, and encounters are ever-present. In this sense, the imaginary signifier of the player is the first person perspective, and it is found in every image plotted in the imageplots.

Perhaps the greatest insight film semiotics can lend to games and imageplot analysis is how signs and narratives are fundamentally fragmented, even as they give the illusion of being unified and complete. Film semiotics suggests that visual signs are fragmentary in the sense that they are always temporary and incomplete, lacking an actual referent and becoming distributed across images and time. Peter Wollen notes this in describing film as the “fragments of raw reality, multiple and equivocal in themselves” (Wollen 132). The meaning of this fragmentation has profound implications for game narrative in that perfectly unitary narrative becomes elusive if not impossible. Imageplots reveal how signs in games are always fragmented and distributed across the overall experience of the game depending on player interactivity; players encounter, interpret, and sequence signs differently. As they do so, they generate similar but different realities, and in every moment of play there is the potential for difference to emerge. Importantly, the variability of signs and narratives in games does not render them ineffectual or secondary to play, but rather demonstrates how they are omnipresent and necessary to the construction of meaning in games. Metz emphasizes the crucial function of signs when he writes, “Nevertheless, it is in [the symbolic’s] wake that we can find hope for a little more knowledge, it is one of its

avatars that introduces ‘understanding’” (Metz 4). ImagePlot helps us visualize how fragmentary signs come together in different configurations in play to create unique narrative realities, and film semiotics provides a framework for theorizing this process and its possibilities.

The play of game signs evident in imagplots reveals a crucial aspect of visual signs that they share with all other signs—as much as they are identifiable and understandable, they are never fully stable. As a visual sign enters into the virtual world and thus into play with other game signs of all sorts, it will continue to change and evolve in a way similar to the change over time Saussure describes in diachronic linguistics (Saussure 81). One type of evolution facing a game sign is formal, as a particular sign evolves according to player interaction and progress. An excellent example of this is the paper bag in the opening room of *P.T.*, which over the course of the game goes from being a simple bag to being a narrator of sorts with a mouth. With each of its evolutions the form of the sign will change somewhat, and consequently the way the sign will be interpreted by the player and others will change as well. However such signs also change informally, in that their relationships to the player and to other game signs will constantly be in flux. There are limits to these changes; after all each game sign remains beholden to the other signs in its system, especially those that make up the central narrative and experience. Still, variance in sign means that narrative form in games is never static or fully stable.

Taken together, the signs in a game create the narrative of a player’s playthrough, and the presence or absence of particular signs can fundamentally alter that narrative. Variances in encountered signs constitute measurable differences in game narrative between playthroughs. Paying close attention to these points of semiotic difference allows one to trace the effects and magnitude of player interactivity in a given game.

Visualizing and Playing with Narrative Form

The archive of player experience created by imageplots allows for measures of variance in time and sign in game analysis. In doing so, it provides a way to record and trace the limits of player interactivity, and thus to assess its effects and potentials. It also enables the identification of core elements of a game and its narrative, making it clearer which parts of a game are common to every player's experience and which ones are specific to individual playthroughs. These types of analysis are valuable to the study of games and other visual media for several reasons: they aid in the analysis of individual texts, they make visible variable and interactive forms such as narrative, and they point to new possibilities for organizing and constructing meaning in digital realities.

Imageplots aid in the analysis of individual texts by allowing us to see the structure of an entire visual text at once, and to assess how that structure contributes to the text's meanings. In other words, ImagePlot allows us to see the shape of a text, much the same way that sentiment analysis allowed Matthew Jockers to see the shape of plots in novels, that topic modeling allowed Ben Schmidt to identify fundamental plot arcs in popular TV shows, or comparing different plots across media allowed Chess to identify the queer potentials for narrative in the play spaces of games.²³ Using imageplots of playthroughs, one clearly sees how long or short a segment of a game is, the colors and aesthetics used in different portions of a game, and what trends or cycles exist in the course of a game. For example, the imageplots of *P.T.* included here reveal similarities and differences across playthroughs that represent both what is universal and unique about each player's experience with the game. In particular, they demonstrate that every

²³ See Jockers, "A Novel Method for Detecting Plot," and Schmidt, "Plot Archeology." Chess's work with queer narrative and play spaces in games is found in "The Queer Case of Video Games."

player will spend roughly the first half of the game exploring more or less similar versions of *P.T.*'s hallway, evidenced in the lighting and coloring of the images that remains the same throughout those sections of the game. However around halfway through their playthrough (more or less, depending on the player), the player will encounter a red version of the hallway that radically changes the player experience and sets off a descent into instability and incoherence in content that dominates much of the rest of the game (see imageplots). While the red hallway starts this for each player, the descent looks different for each player as well: they encounter different versions of the crash screen after the red hallway and randomly generated events from that point on. This structure is essential to the narrative of the game—the narrative of a man who wakes up with no memory of his surroundings, gradually discovering that a man murdered his family in the house and confronting the growing terror that he might be that man. What is at first a casual, if cautious, exploration of a strange house gives way to the desperate attempt to escape an increasingly random, broken, nightmarish reality, and this narrative progression is visible in the structure of the game's structure. Distance visualization allows us to see a game's overall structure, and this perspective lends new evidence to game analysis that links close analysis of specific scenes to larger forms, structures, and patterns.

The imageplots cannot fully account for individual players' reactions and interpretations of game elements, though a future analysis of player actions and facial expressions caught on camera for Twitch.tv streams (such as those found in PT8) may be able to move towards that capability. What they already account for, however, is a sense of the central narrative experience for each game. This central narrative consists of the core parts of a game, or in other words what the developers coded as the essential and necessary elements of the game's characters, events, and overall world. In *P.T.*, the imageplots reveal that the central narrative is found in the red

hallway, the crash screen, and many copies of the hallway that are seemingly identical. Zooming in, one can see that the central narrative is told through documents and objects that all players interact with, and it is the scripted narrative of a man murdering his family and killing himself. It is not that the other parts of the game that are randomly generated or optional do not matter, or that they are not meaningful. Such parts are often still significant for altering or enhancing a game's narrative, and they are crucial for building space for play and individual experience. Yet being able to distinguish between a game's narrative core and its variable content allows for a more accurate assessment of interactivity and difference in experience.

Beyond this, it points toward an understanding of narrative form that could be nonlinear, fluid, and playful. Instead of considering narrative as a linear or multilinear progression of events, what if we considered narrative as a collection of signs that coheres into a core experience, with variations in sign and time orbiting and impacting that center? The crucial difference here is that narrative becomes less of a static and stable form, and more of an active, emergent, and mutable one. Hanna-Riika Roine argues for a similar definition of narrative by pointing out how narrative forms are affected by "the participatory nature of digital media": "they now appear to us as phenomena to be cut, pasted, reassembled, and distributed" (Roine 83). Imageplots visualize these changing and colliding forms in games and other visual media, and help capture what narrative looks like as players and viewers experience it.

One of the longstanding issues with the analysis of game narrative is player interactivity—the fact that the player controls aspects of a game, and becomes an active agent through various inputs, such as choosing what to do, what to use and interface with, and where to go in the virtual world (Walsh 84). Games must provide space and possibility for the play of interactivity, but that same space pulls apart narrative and experience, distributing them across the many possible

iterations that play creates. A helpful term for conceptualizing this fragmentation is Distributed Interactive Storytelling (DIS), explored by Ferretti, Rocchetti, and Cacciaguerra in their article “On Distributing Interactive Storytelling” (Ferretti 219). DIS encapsulates how narrative in games is decentralized in the sense that it must accommodate a plurality of players and enough choice and possibility for play to happen. Games thus face the challenge of maintaining a cohesive, immersive virtual world when the narrative of that world is in danger of being torn apart through the wide distribution created by offering an interactive play space. The conclusion of Ferretti et al. is that games must have systems for correlating and synchronizing the player activity. As imageplots of games demonstrate, games often accomplish this by creating elements that are common to every playthrough, though even these common elements can be interpreted differently by different players. In this framework, one can interpret the relatively stable and coherent first half of *P.T.* apparent in the imageplots as the part of the game that synchronizes player experiences, giving them a shared world before opening up into more possibilities and variations in the second half.

While interactivity in games usually refers to the interaction between player and game, there are other types of interactivity present in games that become apparent in imageplots. For example, Daniel Punday argues that games are really a form of multimedia in that they are a point of interaction between many media, including music, film, and text (Punday 30-31). In this sense, media interact with each other rather as well as with people, particularly in automated ways enabled by software and digital networks. Narrative scholars such as Marie-Laure Ryan have identified similar forms of interactivity between different categories and aspects of games, such as the interaction of a game’s “semiotic substance,” “technical dimension,” and “cultural dimension” (Ryan 25, 29). Players interact with game systems, other players, and even other

media, and all of this takes place on various levels of physical or abstract interaction as forms collide, combine, and emerge. All of these processes are in different ways interactive, as Ryan argues: “digital texts are like an onion made of different layers of skin, and that interactivity can affect different levels” (Ryan 37). Game narrative is dependent on these many forms of interactivity, including the interaction of different narratives, such as those laid out by developers, created by players, or that emerge in collective discourse inside or outside of a game (Mejeur 136). All of these types of narrative and interactivity are present in some way in imageplots: the narratives scripted into game content by developers (in *P.T.*, the story of a man murdering his family) are seen in the objects in the images, the narratives players create themselves are observable in the sequence and duration of content they choose in their playthrough, and even some of the collective narratives that emerge from players interacting is discernible in the player’s webcam as they stream for an audience. Imageplots thus highlight how interactive and variable forms contribute to player experiences and meaning in games. They do so by providing observable measures of these effects—one can identify and examine how the player in PT1 played differently from the player in PT2, and how those differences change the reality of the game.

Because imageplots can visualize and measure the effects of interactivity on narrative form, they also intervene in longstanding theoretical debates about the relationship and distinction between narrative and play. As ludologists such as Craig Lindley argue, players with a predisposition to narrative comprehend events in games as narrative; they narrativize what is not necessarily narrative. Richard Walsh posits that player actions in a game are by themselves simply mechanical behavior; they are “no more inherently narrative than our behavior in negotiating everyday life” (Walsh 77). Markku Eskelinen has even gone as far to say that

discussions of narrative in games should be limited to “cutscenes and backstories” (Eskelinen 224). These arguments have some validity—one could argue that the experience of *P.T.* that I narrated earlier only became a narrative only in my act of telling it. Insofar as the player is an author of what transpires in the virtual world and how they experience it, that does determine its narrativity. If the player chooses not to tell a story or engage with the narrative then those elements remain necessarily limited.

However imageplots and the playthroughs they record challenge these assumptions. Imageplots of games demonstrate the constant connection between narrative and play in that they show how the traditionally narrative elements are interwoven with segments of play. In other words, the cutscenes and backstories that Eskelinen identifies as narrative need play in order to connect them together into a narrative, and cannot be isolated or abstracted away from the player pushing them forward. Even moments in *P.T.* where the player is simply moving down the hallway or looking at objects—the mundane actions that make up the majority of the *P.T.* playthroughs and imageplots—are progressing toward the ultimate fulfillment of the narrative, and it seems arbitrary to completely separate those moments from their narrative function. Further, in games like *P.T.*, it is difficult or impossible to distinguish between cutscenes and play, the moments when the player is or is not in control, as both utilize the same first-person camera viewpoint. Imageplots thus indicate that moments of narrative and play are always in relationship with each other, and indeed need each other in order to operate and create meaning in games. Imageplots help move us beyond simplistic arguments about whether or not game elements are narrative and push us toward new understandings and uses of narrative as an emergent, adaptable, and playful form.

Beyond staging a reconsideration of narrative form, imageplots visualize the collisions and interactions of many forms, structures, and semiotics in games and other visual media, and exploring these collisions can yield new insights on how texts operate and create meaning. This is not completely new work, and there have been calls for the use of semiotics in game studies, such as Paolo Ruffino's work with semiotics and the social contexts of games, or Brian Upton's work with the procedural generation of meaning in games.²⁴ However we have yet to fully account for the immense multiplicity of forms and possibilities for variation in games, and there is still no consensus in game studies (particularly the study of game narrative) as to a methodology for game analysis. ImagePlot makes it increasingly clear that there is a language to games and play, and that there are signs and meaning contained within them. Yet how exactly these signs are formed, laden with meaning, and interpreted by players and developers in different contexts remain rich topics for further research, and ImagePlot provides a method for conducting this research on a much greater scale than individual analyses of individual playthroughs. Identifying the central narrative and using differences in time and sign to measure player interactivity is a starting point. It provides a few of the analytical tools needed for the theory and praxis of a critical, playful interpretation of games that can also account for player interaction and difference. The ability to visualize a game's forms, signs, and central narrative with ImagePlot also has profound interdisciplinary implications: imageplots help assess where and how players spend time in games, which game mechanics and designs are helpful or harmful to player experiences, or how players learn and adapt through the course of a game, among many other questions. For example, the *P.T.* imageplots provide an archive of player experiences in a

²⁴ See Ruffino, "A Theory of Non-Existent Video Games." For Upton's work with semiotics, narrative, and players' meaning-making processes, see *The Aesthetic of Play*.

popular survival horror game, and they can help answer questions of how and why players engage in settings that create unease, fear, and even terror. In this sense, semiotics and the study of game forms can contribute to work in the other disciplines of game studies, even as it pursues its own projects. While the study of visual forms with digital tools is only at its beginning, pursuing it can help us understand the experience and significance of games.

By better understanding how forms operate in games through distance visualization and analysis, we can also find ways to use them in the creation of new story worlds and even new realities. For example, Ryan argues that critical attention to interactivity can reveal how media form new spaces and experiences for players of games (Ryan “The Interactive Onion” 40-41). Alice Bell capitalizes on this observation and other parts of Ryan’s work to suggest that hypertext and interactive fictions (including games) constantly generate “Possible Worlds” that are “ontological domains”, and thus different spaces and conditions of being (Bell 79). Players repeatedly choose, explore, or foreclose upon these possible worlds, and they do so by interacting with the changeable forms that comprise the game system.

Of course there are limits to which possible worlds can emerge that are largely tied to the limitations of the game system. As Ryan writes, “we do not really have a story-generating system sufficiently sophisticated to produce a wide variety of interesting stories out of data internal to the system” (Ryan “The Interactive Onion” 48). A story system capable of adapting to any user input has long been the goal of game designers such as Chris Crawford, but even after decades of attempts such systems are only capable of generating basic procedural narratives. It might be that the creation of a fully interactive system can only happen once we have reassessed our understanding of forms ranging from signs to narratives and beyond, and developed computing, programming languages, game engines, and other assets for better utilizing variable

and emergent forms. In other words, we will never have fully interactive and responsive computing systems if the forms those systems are built on are categorical, Boolean, and linear. ImagePlot and other digital humanities tools for visualization can help get us there by visualizing forms, and making it possible to compare how they collide, flow, and shift. In games, they reveal what emerges as the common core of a game's possible worlds and establish what most possible worlds for a game will look like. In effect, they show us a game's pieces, and how those pieces can relate to each other and to us. With that knowledge, we can envision how our interactions with a game—along with all of the variations they engender—could be different or better. Now let's play.

APPENDIX

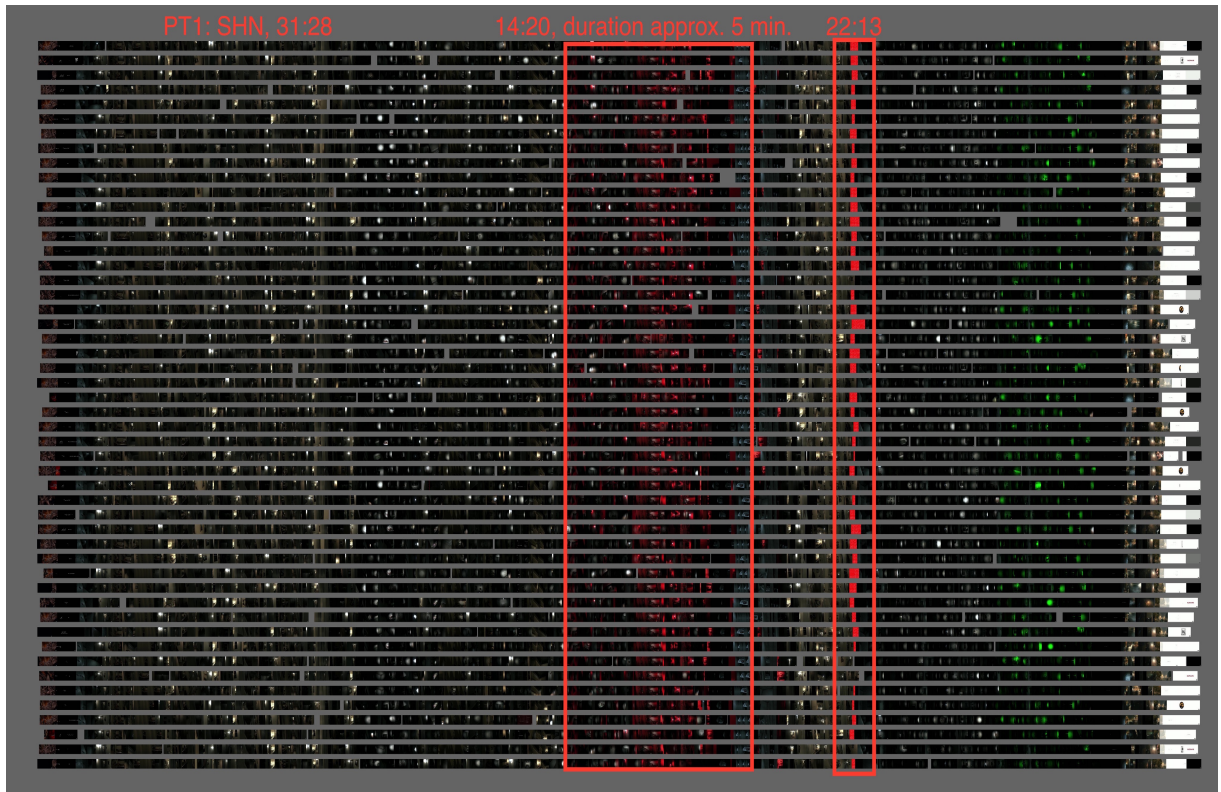


Figure 14. PT1: Walkthrough, 0:31:28 Play Time, Red Hallway 14:20, Duration 5:17

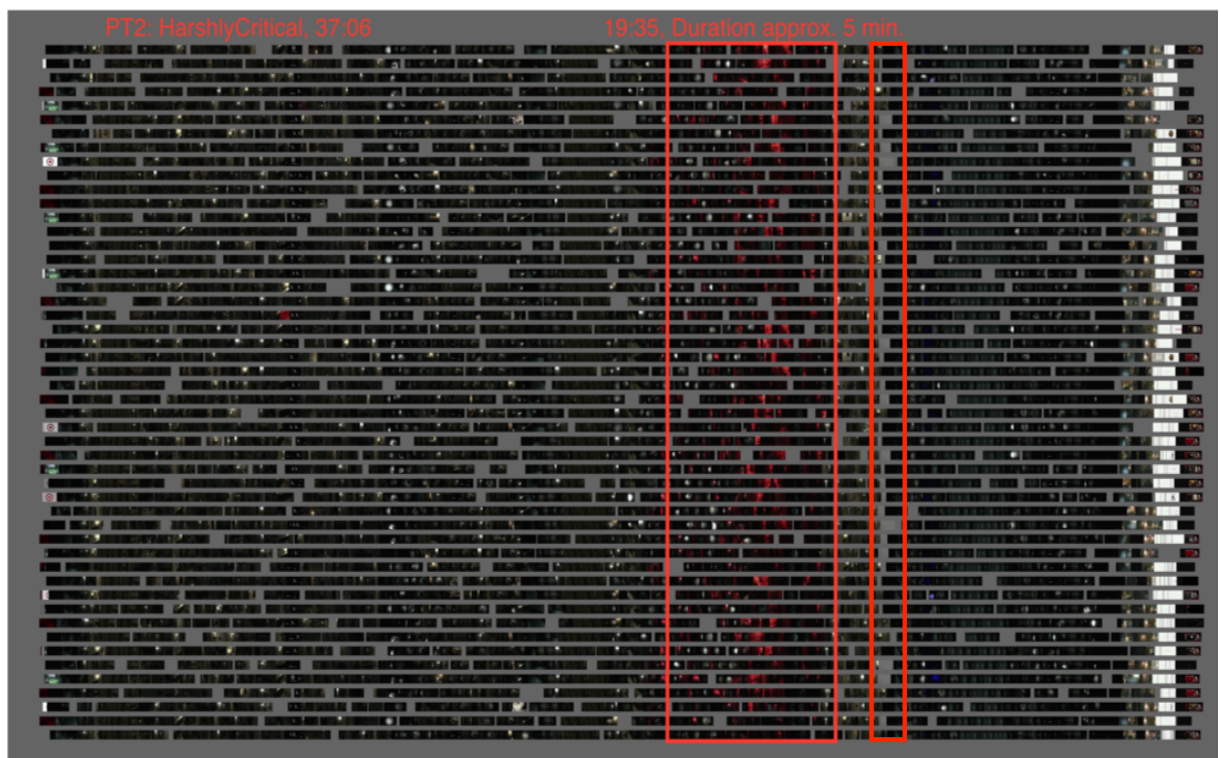


Figure 15. PT2: Let's Play, 0:37:06 Play Time, Red Hallway 19:35, Duration 5:03



Figure 16. PT3: Walkthrough, 0:29:44 Play Time, Red Hallway 13:00, Duration 4:30



Figure 17. PT4: Walkthrough, 0:41:56 Play Time, Red Hallway 17:30, Duration 5:37

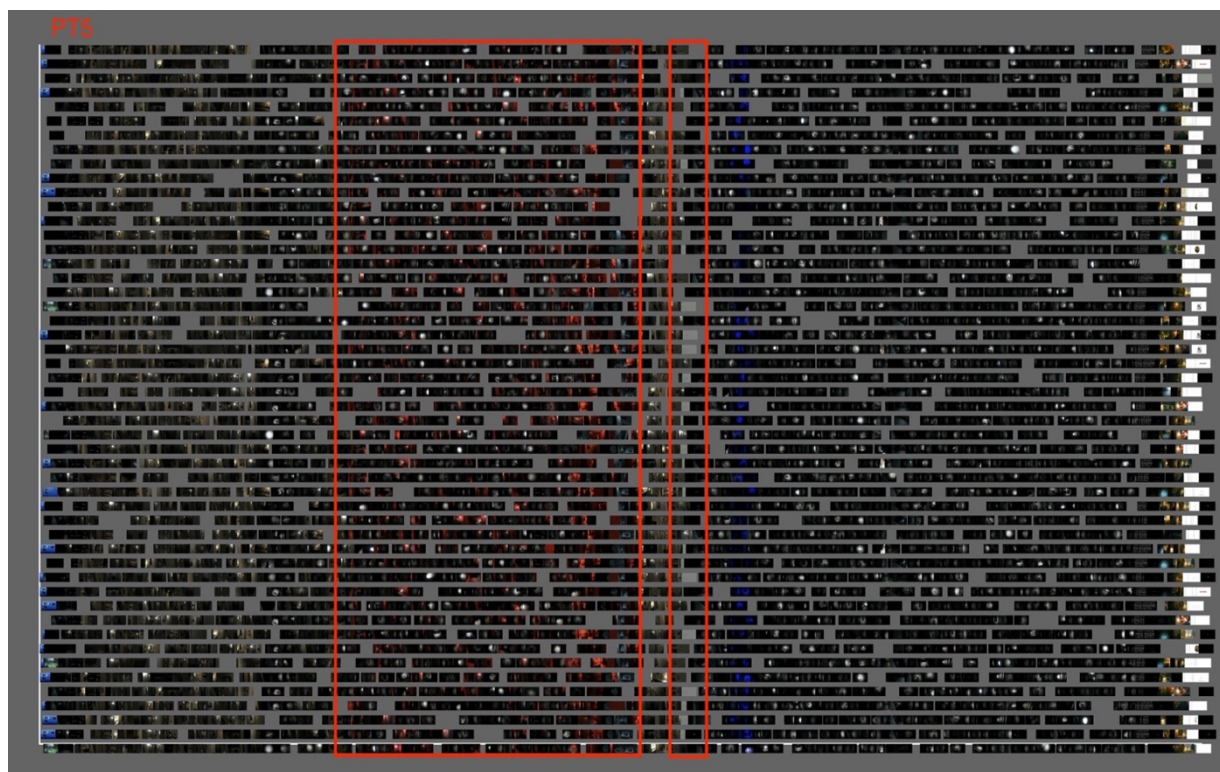


Figure 18. PT5: Let's Play, 0:51:11 Play Time, Red Hallway 13:25, Duration 12:43

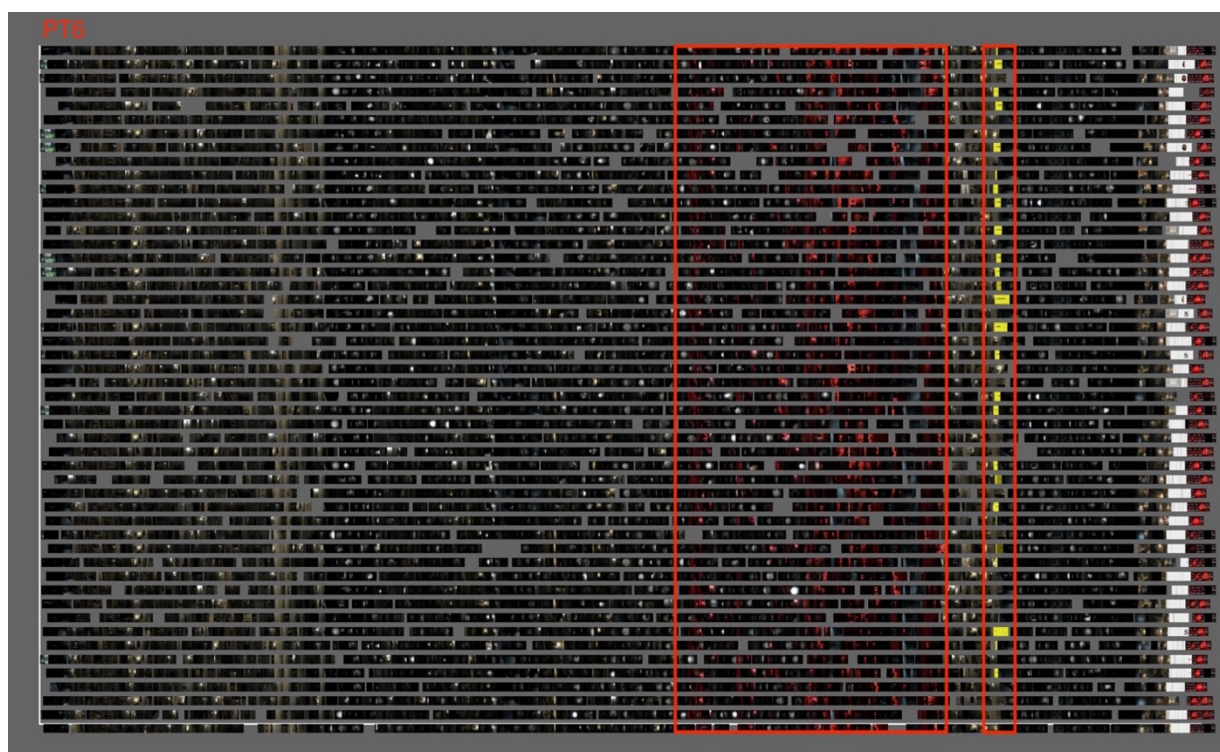


Figure 19. PT6: Walkthrough, 0:40:00 Play Time, Red Hallway 22:02, Duration 8:49

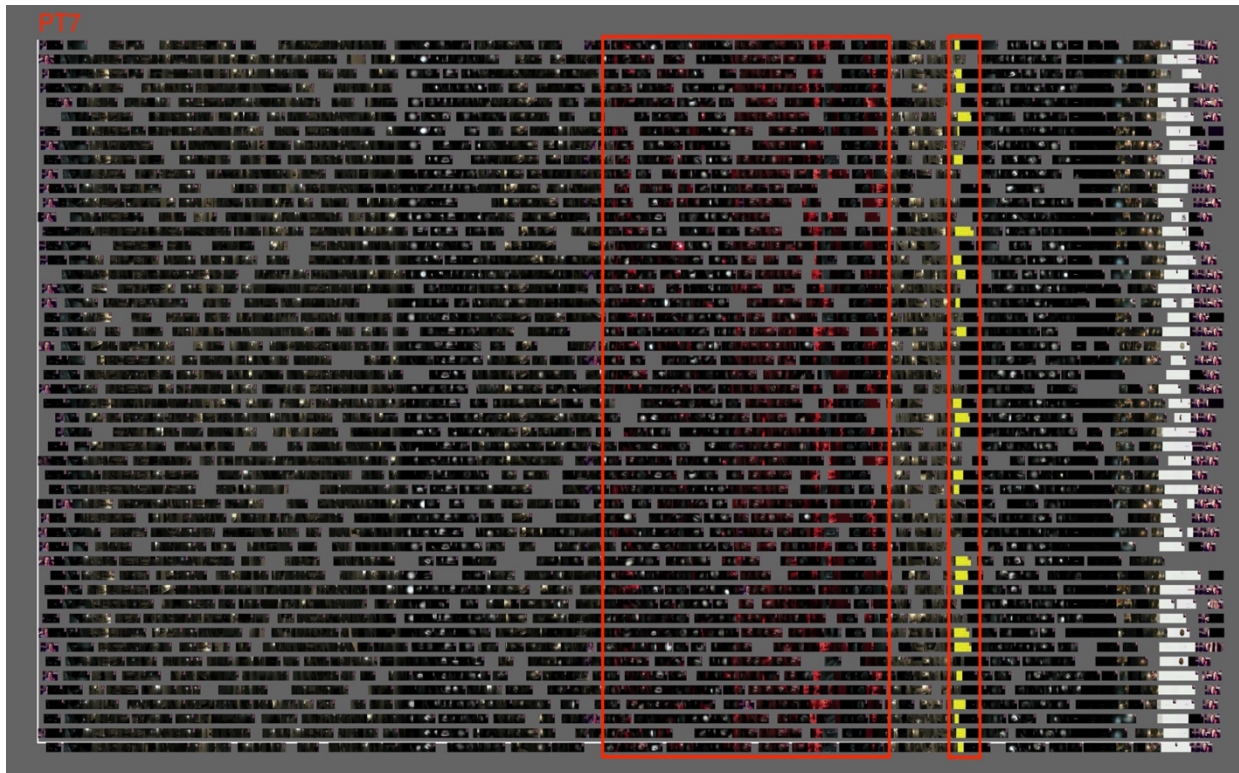


Figure 20. PT7: Let's Play, 0:27:07 Play Time, Red Hallway 13:09, Duration 6:18

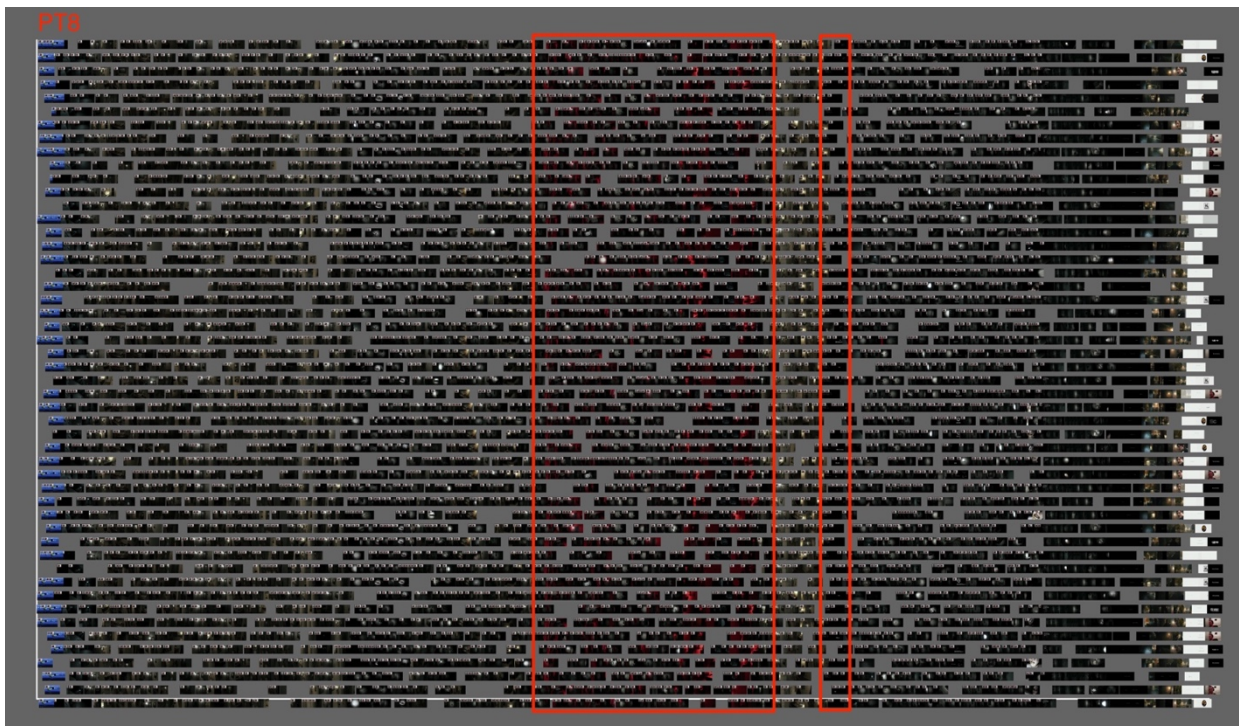


Figure 21. PT8: Let's Play, 0:30:15 Play Time, Red Hallway 12:48, Duration 5:37

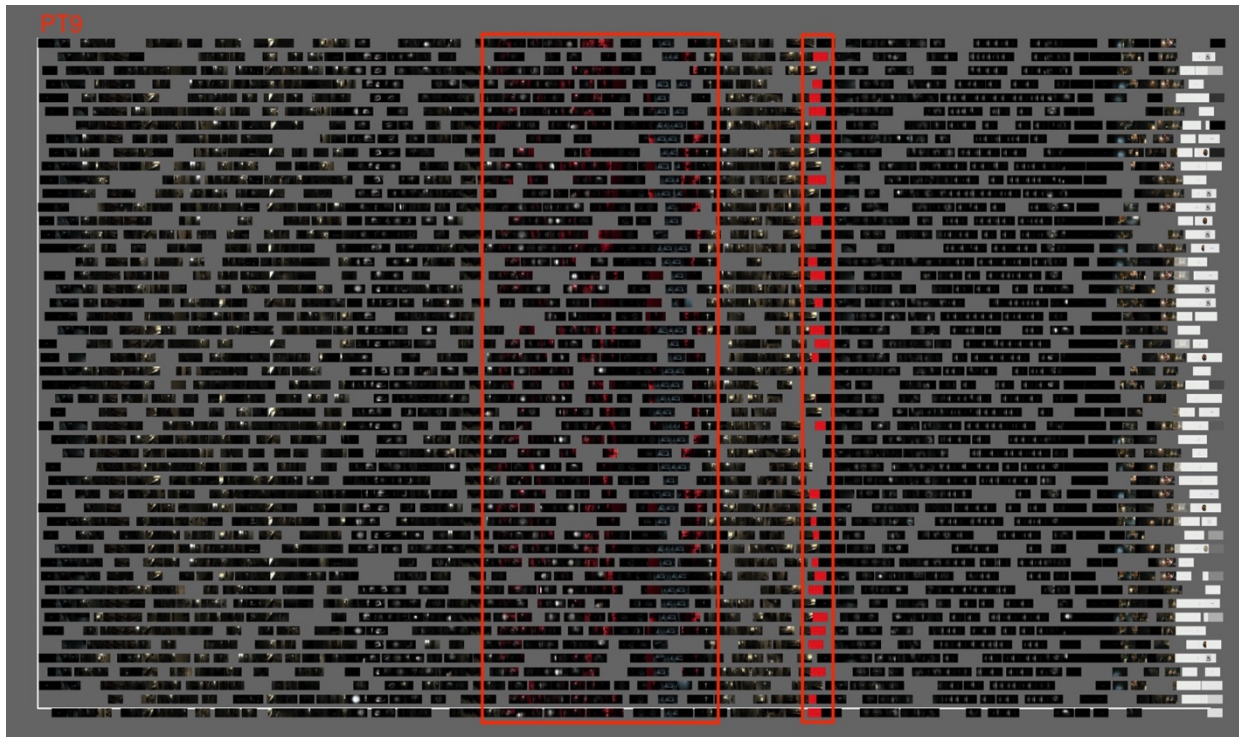


Figure 22. PT9: Let's Play, 0:20:00 Play Time, Red Hallway 8:00, Duration 4:16

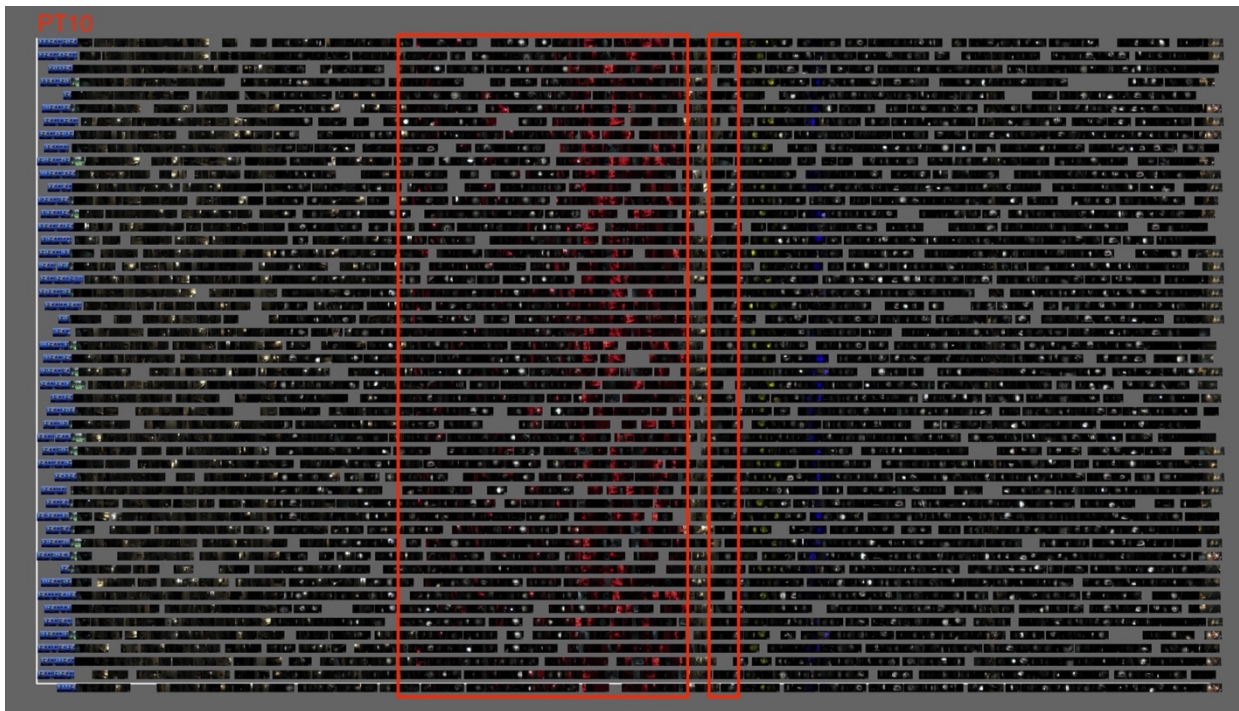


Figure 23. PT10: Let's Play, 1:24:50 Play Time, Red Hallway 26:59, Duration 19:34

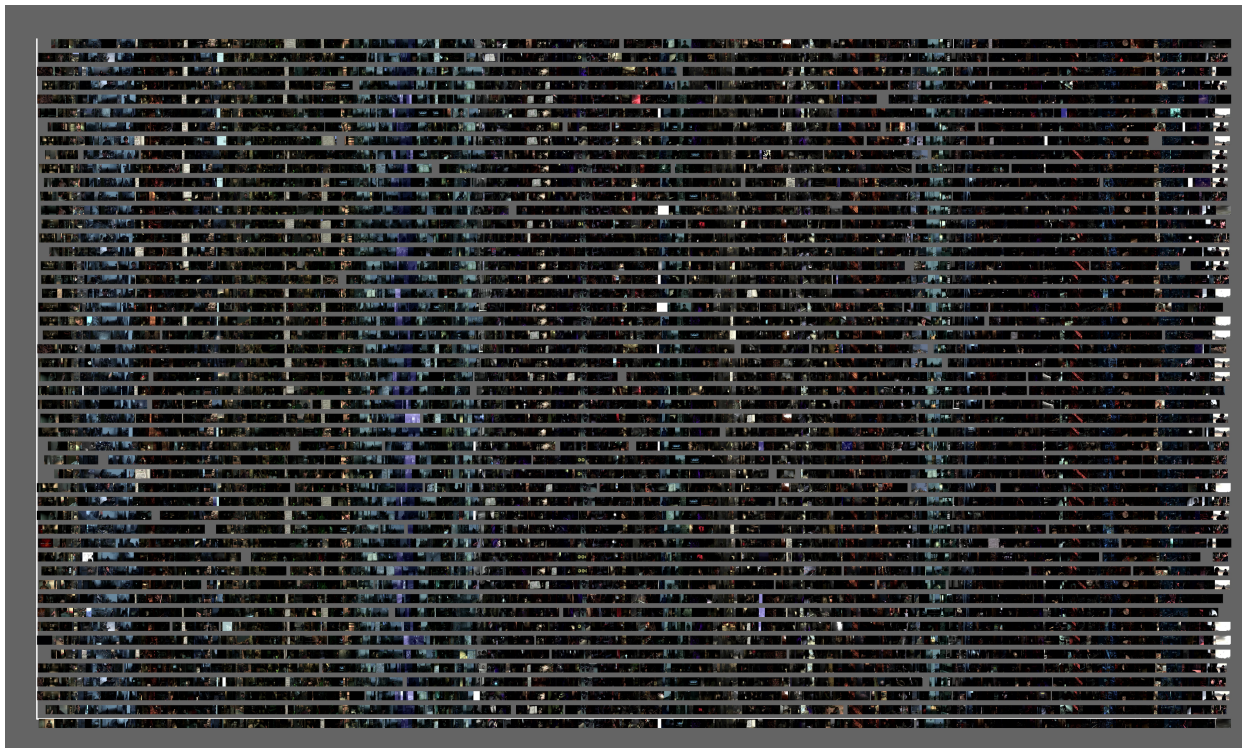


Figure 24. SHD1: Walkthrough, 4:59:19 Play Time



Figure 25. SHD2: Speedrun, 2:52:20 Play Time

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Chapter 4

The Hunt for Queer Spaces: Mainstream Indie Games, Representation, and Limited Worlds

The most exciting aspects of indie games are the opportunities they present for experimenting with forms in video games, and it's no surprise that almost all of the most innovative and imaginative games have been produced by indie studios and developers. To name only a few, indie games such as *Journey* (thatgamecompany 2012) have shown us what non-competitive games of collaboration and exploration can look like, *SOMA* (Frictional Games 2015) has demonstrated how games can explore complex philosophical concepts, and *No Man's Sky* (Hello Games 2016) has pushed the limits of what we can do and imagine with procedurally-generated content. These trends have led many scholars to consider indie games as an avant-garde; Hartmut Koenitz, for example, has described indie games, particularly walking simulators (a genre about exploring and experiencing a particular narrative situation and environment), as a forward-thinking and experimental "next step in the evolution of narrative-focused video games" (3). As Bonnie Ruberg notes, many other scholars, such as Alex Galloway, Mary Flanagan, Brian Schrank, and John Sharp, have similarly theorized a video games avant-garde, but many of these theories rarely take up intersectional topics of race, gender, or sexuality in the formation of that avant-garde. Instead, the focus has remained predominantly on how indie, avant-garde games challenge existing standards in aesthetics, mechanics, and interfaces by imagining new ways of playing and being in game spaces.

Queer indie games—games that feature queer characters and experiences, are made by queer developers, or are explicitly for queer players—are pushing the indie games avant-garde further by uniting experimentation with form with experimentation with representation, identity, and collectivity, all from queer perspectives. In other words, queer games do more than imagine new forms, they also imagine how those forms are gendered and sexed, and how forms might do

the critical work of destabilizing heteronormative systems. Bonnie Ruberg refers to these games as the “queer games avant-garde,” and notes how they challenge the exclusionary standards of video games and gaming cultures that often prioritize the experiences of straight white men (10). Some of these games have garnered critical acclaim and widespread recognition in games journalism and scholarship. The most prominent example is likely *Gone Home* (The Fullbright Company 2013), a game in the walking simulator genre that tasks players with exploring a family home and piecing together the family members’ narratives, one of which is a teenage lesbian coming-out story. The game was widely praised (and won BAFTA and VGX awards) for its narrative, environment, and inclusion of a queer experience, and reviews and articles about the game have been featured in many publications from *The Mary Sue* to *Polygon* to *NPR* (Chambers; Grant; Mullis). *Gone Home* has often been used in games journalism to make the argument that video games are getting more mature, inclusive, and better with representation, as Ruberg mentions in her chapter. There is some truth to this argument: there are more queer representations in games today than there were 10 years ago, and some queer indie games have become popular and financially successful (Greer).²⁵

Yet there are many reasons why this narrative of things getting better for queer representation and queer games should give us pause, and this chapter argues that it is especially important to take stock of the limitations and challenges that remain as some queer games gain more visibility. If we have a queer games avant-garde, what does that avant-garde look like? Amongst the new forms and worlds that are emerging in it, what are the common themes and

²⁵ For more information about queer representation and content in games through the years, see the LGBTQ Video Game Archive (<https://lgbtqgamearchive.com/>). Several visualizations of the Archive have been made, including *Queer Intersections*, <http://queerintersections.cmejeur.org/>, and *Visualizing the LGBTQ Video Game Archive*, <https://s-utsch.github.io/lgbtq-games-represent/#title>. See also Utsch et al..

trends? Which narratives and experiences are being envisioned and privileged, and which are being silenced, elided, or marginalized? This chapter uses three queer games as case studies for starting to answer these questions: *Gone Home*, *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter* (The Astronauts 2014), and *Fragments of Him* (Sassybot 2016). Each of these games gained mainstream popularity, journalistic coverage, and awards: beyond *Gone Home*'s noted above, *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter* won a BAFTA Games Award and was reviewed in Polygon, Kotaku, and The Guardian, and *Fragments of Him* won a People's Choice Award and was reviewed in Polygon, Destructoid, and Killscreen (McEwan; Frank). Each also has a slightly different relationship to the queer games community. *Gone Home* has queer content and was developed in consultation with queer folks about their lived experiences but was not developed by queer folks themselves. *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter* has queer content but does not appear to have been developed by or in consultation with queer folks (at least based on what has been publicized). *Fragments of Him* has queer content and was developed at least in part from the developer's own queer experiences.

Taken together, these games paint a similar (and similarly limited) picture of the queer experiences that are most represented in popular indie games. In each game, the queer characters are depicted as dealing with rejection, grief, and loss caused by heteronormative family and friends. It would be reductive to say that each of these games do not have other moments as well—moments of hope, love, and joy—yet in each game the queer characters' overall stories are defined by marginalization and even tragedy. By limiting queer experiences to negativity and hardship, these games play into a common narrative of queer difficulty in coming out and living openly in homophobic and transphobic society. They often do so in order to elicit an affective response from the player, such as empathy, compassion, or even pity. Restricting queer

characters to particular tropes and narratives in this way is similar to popular culture representations of other marginalized peoples. For example, Gemma Sou discusses how games depicting refugee experiences frequently rely on tropes that are “orientalising and dehumanising portrayals of refugees as victims, which rely on grand emotional discourses that evoke sentimentalities of pity and compassion for suffering others” (510). Likewise, Kishonna Gray has noted how black characters in games are almost always portrayed either as “individuals who are trying to survive in a (white man’s) world with goals no different from those of their white counterparts,” or as “ghettoized, with emphases on crime, drug abuse, and materialism” (62-63). For LGBTQ characters and characters from other marginalized communities, representation usually means a portrayal limited to the stereotypes that are most visible in larger social and cultural discourse.

The problem with this trend in representation in prominent queer indie games is not that these games are representing the very real difficulties and hardships that are a part of everyday life for many queer folks. As Jack Halberstam argues, such experiences are often part of a queer negativity, a failing to meet heteronormative expectations that can lead to rejecting such norms and opening up opportunities for alternatives (96). However mainstream queer indie games often dwell in the difficulty and hardship of queer lives and foreclose on other possibilities, making the dominant narratives of queerness those of tragedy, death, and heartbreak. In other words, such games ultimately define queer characters by their experiences of oppression in normative systems, and in doing so they limit the social imaginary of what queer folks can be, do, and live. Further, because of these games’ relative popularity with players outside of the LGBTQ community, these dominant narratives can come to define queer experiences for cisgendered and heteronormative players. In effect, mainstream queer indie games perform a constrained version

of queer negativity for audiences, one in which the queer character is the unfortunate failure or the pitiable outcast but is not allowed to be anything else. Instead of leading to other potential queer realities with different ways of being and loving, this queer negativity becomes a trap for queer characters that allows players to feel good when they (rarely) escape it or feel sad when they suffer or die in it. In the end heteronormativity is reinscribed because all queerness can be is difficulty and hardship in a normative system. Queer characters are made beautiful in their suffering, and their futures and their better places are almost always elsewhere and out of play.

The solution to this popular narrative is not necessarily about being able to identify with queer characters in these games or needing more or better characters to identify with—many players already identify with existing queer characters, limited though they often are. As Adrienne Shaw argues, identity is complex and one does not need to identify with a representation in order to find it meaningful (93). Rather, it is crucial to recognize that games place us, as Aubrey Anable puts it, “into particular and unique affective relations to history, technology, and each other” (loc 2606). In recent years, popular queer games often do this by putting players in historical and contemporary queer experiences of marginalization and trauma. At times, they may even be capable of making players feel queer negativity, some of what Whitney Pow describes as “the tenuous experience of frustration, impossibility, and uncertainty: the experience of being a queer body and subject in the world” (44). Yet these feelings are only part of queer experiences, and, as the case studies in this chapter demonstrate, popular queer games often minimize the equally important feelings of queer power, hope, and joy.

Thankfully, there are already queer games challenging and resisting this trend, and I want to clarify here which games I refer to when discussing the problematic elements of popular queer indie games. Specifically, there are many queer game developers who are making games for

themselves and their communities that imagine queer spaces and ways of being that exist beyond the confines of heteronormative cultures. These developers range from veterans with multiple games to “hobbyists and non-programmers making their first games” (Anthropy loc 143-144). For example, the title of this chapter is an allusion to Anna Anthropy’s game, *The Hunt for the Gay Planet*, which began as a spoof of Bioware’s decision in *Star Wars: The Old Republic* to make LGB romances available on one planet in their new expansion in 2013 (Hernandez). The game tasks players with searching for a “secret paradise planet,” “a glittering world where women walk arm-in-arm with women,” called “Lesbionica.” Robert Yang has made games such as *The Tearoom*, *Cobra Club HD*, and *Stick Shift*, each of which directly represent different types and acts of gay male sexuality. Both of these developers, and many more, have created games that express queer experiences beyond heteronormative expectations, and their works embody the sort of queer imagining that this chapter argues for. These indie games that are developed by and/or for LGBTQ folks, rather than broader mainstream audiences, point to the radical potential for indie games to disrupt and subvert common social and cultural assumptions that limit queerness to stereotypical forms.

The queer games that this chapter critiques are mainstream queer indie games—the games like *Gone Home*, *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter*, and *Fragments of Him* that have gained considerable attention from games media and success in reaching a broad audience, but often at the expense of imagining queer realities beyond difficulty. Mainstream queer indie games are part of the larger trend of the increasing visibility of indie games due to better access to publishing and distribution platforms (Lien). These are the queer indie games that sell the most by appealing to players beyond the LGBTQ community, and they get taken up the most in popular discourse, often as examples of improving representation and providing emotional (even

relatable!) queer stories in games. They rely on narratives of queer rejection and hardship and performing those experiences in ways that are recognizable, palatable, and marketable to cisgendered and straight audiences. Stuart Richards identifies a similar trend in “Indiewood films,” indie films that are picked up and marketed by major studios to large audiences, usually as art films. Richards describes how these films with LGBT themes “are set in the past and conjure up a sense of nostalgia. [...] This past, however, is often an adverse environment for these characters. By making these narratives accessible to mainstream audiences, this nostalgia places ‘homosexuality in the conservative Utopia of these challenged contexts’” (Richards 25). *Gone Home*, *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter*, *Fragments of Him*, and similar games operate in much the same way in indie games: they provide mainstream audiences with an approachable opportunity to play queer difficulty and tragedy, feel a sense of empathy, sadness, and perhaps injustice, and then move on.

The queer games covered in this chapter and Indiewood films with LGBTQ content have similar cultural functions and market strategies, but the difference between them is mainstream queer indie games are often not fully accepted as games in the first place. For example, *Gone Home*, *Vanishing*, and *Fragments of Him* are all walking simulators, the game genre previously mentioned. The term walking simulator emerged after *Gone Home*’s release in 2013 as a pejorative for narrative-based games that focus on exploring an environment, piecing together stories, and often having a particular affective experience, rather than on combat, accruing points, or complex mechanics. As Melissa Kagan explains, walking simulators angered a particular demographic of predominantly male, hardcore gamers (also the primary demographic involved with the #GamerGate harassment campaign) who vehemently argued that, “A walking sim isn’t just a bad game; it’s a nongame and, worse, one that duplicitously pretends to be a

game” (289). The games are seen by as shifty, untrustworthy invaders; the latest tools of feminist scholars and critics coming to change games or take them away. Thus while games like *Gone Home* mainstream queerness to some extent, they still run afoul of gatekeeping practices that seek to exclude any challenges to the status quo of gaming cultures—a status quo built to privilege straightness, maleness, whiteness, and able-bodiedness. Kagan points out that this happens in large part because walking simulators are “part of a long tradition of gendered wandering, of coding certain kinds of exploration as manly and others as (unacceptably) feminine” (278). The dismissal of walking simulators as games is not just a quibble about the definition of a game or mismatched expectations, it is fundamentally a rejection of specific forms of play that are coded as feminine and considered lesser. As walking simulators, the games discussed in this chapter limit the types of queer experiences that many gamers encounter in games, but they also do crucial work in challenging the standard definitions and expectations of what gets to be a game and who gets to count in gaming cultures and game studies.

Mainstream queer indie games occupy a liminal space between radical queer potential and popular, normative narratives, and this means they offer both immense possibility and severe limitation. On the one hand, indie games provide spaces for more queer representation that can counter and disrupt representation in AAA games and increase awareness of queer experiences through digital platforms like Steam that reach millions of players around the world. On the other hand, the representation that this increased access and popularity has provided has largely restricted queer folks and our experiences to a familiar narrative of rejection, loss, tragedy, and grief that sells well. The critique offered in this chapter is not meant to ultimately resolve this tension, as queerness itself exists in constant tension with normativity (Warner xxvi). Nor is the point that games should not represent queer hardship and difficulty—they absolutely should, as

these things are still very real parts of many queer folks' lived experiences. Rather, the goal of assessing representation in our current cultural moment with the growth of queer indie games is to find where and how queerness is defined and limited in games. It is only by teasing out the narrative boundaries that continue to constrain LGBTQ experiences in popular culture that we can break them down and better realize the potential to imagine and play with queer realities in indie games.

Homes that Are Gone

Gone Home is arguable the most well-known and popular queer game to date. In the game, players play as Katie Greenbriar, a college student returning home from overseas to find no one home. Players are tasked with exploring the house and finding out where Katie's sister, Samantha, and her parents are, and what has happened at the family home while she has been away. By interacting with objects scattered around the house ranging from notes to recordings to a Christmas duck, the player discovers that Katie's parents have an unstable marriage, and that Sam has struggled to adjust to a new home and has a romantic relationship with Lonnie, a girl from school. Due in part to its narrative and mechanics, *Gone Home* became a contentious point in the toxic #GamerGate harassment campaign that began in 2014, the year after its release. #GamerGate began with groups of gamers targeting and harassing Anita Sarkeesian, Zoe Quinn, and other critics and developers based on their perceived involvement with a supposed feminist conspiracy to destroy games and gamer identity, including alleged unethical practices they used to garner media attention and positive reviews (Chess & Shaw 212). At the height of the frenzied conspiracy theories that #GamerGate produced about so-called ethics in journalism, some gamers claimed that *Gone Home*'s critical success was the result of personal connections and

insider deals between the game's developers and reviewers (Kagan 288). The issue, of course, was not that such shady dealings actually existed, but rather that a narrative-driven game that eschewed many of the most prominent elements of mainstream games and featured queer content became so popular. In these regards, the game is well-deserving of its praise.

However there remains an issue with the form that queer representation in *Gone Home* takes, and ultimately with the queer reality the game constructs for the player. Namely, as much as the game's narrative is about Sam's relationship with Lonnie and her coming-out story, Sam is absent from the game space, and that space is not a space that welcomes or fully supports her. She has moved on to find better spaces and opportunities elsewhere with Lonnie, and her story is instead told by the objects she left behind and the disembodied narration that plays when the player interacts with them. Sam is relegated to being the ghost in this haunted house—the specter of past emotions and experiences indexed in the artifacts that linger and may never be reclaimed. In this, *Gone Home* presents an opportunity to dwell in a tense and problematic question: what does it mean to represent a queer experience in the absence of the person who had and lived it? One way to answer this question is by considering how the game structures queer experience with particular feelings. As Anable argues, “video games—their images, sounds, stories, mechanics, and interfaces—can be read and interpreted as giving shape and form to particular feelings” (loc 2621). *Gone Home*'s spaces of absence and its abandoned objects give shape to feelings of loss and longing, and ultimately mean that the queer experience as absence is defined by hardship and sorrow. To be sure, there is love and hope in particular objects too, but those loves and hopes are located elsewhere, outside of the game space and outside of play.

The tension between Sam’s absence and her omnipresence in the form of objects and artifacts is representative of the often uneasy and difficult relationships LGBTQ folks have with home—home here being the traditional, heteronormative family structure and the spaces it occupies. By setting the game in a home, naming it *Gone Home*, and portraying that home as a space of absence and loss, the developers of *Gone Home* capture how homes are sites of rejection for many queer folks, and places where they cannot be (either at all or in full).

Pavlounis describes how this reality defines Sam as a character: “Sam’s narrative remains one of disorientation, of coming to terms with a world—and a home—that does not allow her to move through it fluidly” (587). The unwelcoming and even oppressive nature of the home is evident from the first moments of the game, when it draws on horror tropes in order to make the player feel uneasy and give them the sense that something is wrong at the Greenbriar home. On the front porch, the player hears wind, rain, and thunder outside, making it clear that the setting is the quintessential dark and stormy night of a gothic horror story. The foyer of the home is dark



Figure 26. The living room, illuminated only by the TV’s “Severe Weather Warning” message.

when the player enters, and the lights flicker ominously. As the player explores the rooms of the house, they are often only able to see a portion of the room, such as the living room that is illuminated only by the TV broadcasting a foreboding “Severe Weather Warning” message (Figure 26). By limiting the player’s vision, the game generates fear and anxiety over what might be lurking unseen in the dark corners of the house (Chien 64). And, of course, there are secrets, violences, and hurts hiding in the house—they just do not take the forms of literal, physical monsters or murderers. From its early moments, *Gone Home* constructs an environment and experience akin to queer experiences of home as “oppressively alienating and unsafe” (Pow 44). It is this space that forces Sam to leave and seek better spaces elsewhere.

While the home in *Gone Home* starts as a place of unease, anxiety, and rejection, it changes over the course of the game as the player explores and discovers more of the house. As the player encounters more of the rooms in the house, it becomes clear that it is not filled with supernatural horrors, murderers, or any of the other common antagonists. The house is just a house—there is no one home, but there are many experiences and stories in it for the player to piece together. In his interpretation of the game, Pavlounis points out that this shift in tone and atmosphere marks the player’s (and Katie’s) progressive mastery of the game space; as they play, the player organizes the story fragments they interact with into a complete linear narrative. He argues this effects a “straightening” on the game’s narrative, an “organized unqueering” that works to “to negate or ‘correct’ the possibility of queer temporality and spatiality that the game might otherwise enable” (Pavlounis 585). In other words, the further the game progresses, the straighter its form gets. To relate this point to the beginning of the game, the game goes from an oppressive atmosphere of horror and rejection to an increasingly normative form defined by mastery and familiarity. In both situations, *Gone Home*’s space is not one for Sam or her queer

experiences—she does not get to exist there, and her narrative remains fundamentally limited by home and its heteronormative expectations.

Gone Home presents a troubled situation of both opportunity and profound limitation on multiple levels for queer characters, players, and developers. Specifically, it exhibits what Pow calls the “tenuous experience of belonging and estrangement from home” that queer folks deal with constantly in heteronormative cultures (44). I argue that this experience of attachment and estrangement, of identification and disidentification, can manifest as a form of cruel optimism, as defined by Lauren Berlant: “A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing” (1). One can see this in *Gone Home*’s narrative: for Sam, home is an origin, both of identity and past experiences that define who she is, and of rejection and trauma. It is a cruel optimism in the sense that it sustains her and supposedly provides a space of familial belonging, even as it denies her feelings for Lonnie and undermines her ability to be and explore who she is. Beyond the characters within the game, *Gone Home* is also a case study in how the desire to belong and find a home in gaming cultures can be a cruel optimism for queer players. It can be desirable for queer games to gain greater visibility, recognition, and success. But the mainstreaming of queer games, at least in the current trend of popular queer indie games, can also perpetuate limited and even harmful depictions of queerness. A similar cruel optimism can exist for queer game developers, for whom video games have immense potential as a creative and expressive art form, but whose communities and cultures are often inherently exclusionary.

Ultimately, *Gone Home* is representative of where queer folks often find themselves in gaming spaces: present absence. By this I mean the curious form of only getting to be present in indirect, partial, and incomplete ways, of having to exist in absences and silences socially or self-

enforced. Gayle Rubin describes these experiences as the “mystified” and “oblique angles” by which gender and sexuality are often represented (138). Present absence takes on multiple meanings in different contexts. For example, it describes how queer players often have to hide or diminish their gender and sexuality in order to pass and fit in with gaming communities. In popular queer indie games, including *Gone Home*, it captures how queer hopes and futures and realities are always elsewhere, and present only in their absence in past and current realities. Another form of present absence is how queer characters are coded as LGBTQ in some games, but their identities must remain hidden and limited—they can be present only in certain acceptable ways, and any objectionable (i.e. too queer) parts of who they are are absented and shoved off-screen. This form is evident in *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter*, to which I now turn.

Present Vanishings

I have a guilty confession: I am not even sure *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter* (hereafter referred to as *Vanishing*) counts as a queer game. *Vanishing* tells the story of Ethan Carter, an adolescent boy who creates his own stories and fantasy worlds based on the few books and magazines of genre fiction that he has. The player plays as Paul Prospero, a paranormal detective who received a letter from Ethan and has come to investigate his disappearance. As the story unfolds, the player discovers that Ethan’s working-class family views his imaginative nature and his tendency to daydream as strange and effeminate, and they ridicule him for it and call him a “faggot” at a critical moment in the game. The reason I semi-facetiously say that I am not sure if *Vanishing* counts as a queer game is that Ethan himself never claims any particular queer identity or desire in the game, rather it is written onto him by his homophobic and heteronormative

family members. I believe it is important that any analysis of the game not repeat that violence by assuming or forcing an identity onto Ethan (even if he is a fictional character).

Nevertheless, it is clear that the game codes Ethan and his storyworlds as queer. As Sara Ahmed writes in *Queer Phenomenology*, “To make things queer is certainly to disturb the order of things” (161). Ethan excels at disturbing the order of things. He disturbs the order of his family by not fitting into their expectations of a rugged and toxic masculinity. He disturbs the order of storyworlds by mashing and melding them together—Paul Prospero’s story, for example, intersects with the stories of an astronaut going to the moon, of a witch living in the woods, and of miners uncovering the tomb of a dark god. And, through his stories, he disturbs the order of his home, Red Creek Valley, by awakening “The Sleeper,” a malevolent, Cthulhu-like figure who personifies Ethan’s feeling that his family is out to get him. As queer folks know well, there can be fatal consequences for these sorts of disturbances, and there are for Ethan: in the scene where his family calls him a faggot, an accidental fire quite literally forces Ethan into a closet where he dies. In all of these disturbances, the game codes Ethan and its worlds as queer, even if it never openly or explicitly acknowledges that queerness.

By coding Ethan in this way, the game performs a contemporary version of queer invisibility that scholars such as Larry Gross and Martin Meeker identify as pervasive in media prior to the mainstreaming of gay and lesbian characters in the late 1990s and early 2000s, in which queer characters cannot be openly (and certainly not unapologetically) queer or can only appear in certain limited roles, such as villains (Gross 56; Meeker). Coding and queer invisibility in *Vanishing* and similar games can be understood as a form of present absence, a way of making queer characters and experiences present but also effacing or vanishing that presence. In some cases, this can take a pernicious form of diminishing and hiding queerness in order to make it

more acceptable to heteronormative players and gaming cultures. Other games, such as *Vanishing*, use it to represent the very real queer experiences of passing, of having expectations and assumptions forced onto oneself, and of not being able to openly express one's own identity and experience.

In contrast to *Gone Home*, which locates its queer worlds and possibilities decidedly off-screen and outside of the game space, *Vanishing* regularly makes those worlds present by allowing the player to explore Ethan's fantasies and imagined realities. By piecing together clues and objects in the game, the player activates and travels through portals between Ethan's storyworlds (Figure 27). These portals signify entering a new storyworld, each with its own rules and fantastic potentials, but they also represent how those worlds fray and bleed together. At the end of each story, Paul Prospero (and the player) are pulled back to Ethan's reality, usually to one of his family members ridiculing him or attacking him for his imagination and his reliance



Figure 27. A portal that blends the game's storyworlds and allows the player to enter Ethan's stories.

on fantasy—his unmanly, feminine (and thus, lesser) behavior. The juxtaposition of Ethan’s fabulous worlds with his painful realities reveals how the two are inextricably bound together: the stories are his escape, and their fantastical nature matters because they provide him with places different and better than he can go to. Envisioning queer spaces and queer realities can do this for queer players, which is why it is so important that the dominant narrative of queer experiences in popular queer indie games is not just one of rejection, hardship, and tragedy. Unfortunately, *Vanishing* still falls into this trend. While the game creates other worlds for Ethan and the player, it constantly forecloses on them as well, and with Ethan’s death at the end of the game the teleology of the game’s narrative is tragedy. There are only glimpses of queer realities that are never allowed to fully manifest, while the reality of heteronormative expectations and toxic masculinities is constantly reinscribed and still reigns at the end of the game.

Vanishing offers an opportunity to carefully consider what gets to count as a queer game. Are queer games only those with overt queer content? Must queer games be made by queer folks? Do queer games have to have a certain intentionality to them, such that their developers intend for them to be queer and to be played and read as such? My goal here is not to provide definitive answers to these questions, but rather to trouble these distinctions somewhat. I argue it is a mistake to not count games like *Vanishing* for their queer elements, even if they are not often labeled as queer. In other words, games that are not obviously queer in terms of their narratives, characters, and representations can still be queer games, as Jordan Wood demonstrates with *The Binding of Isaac* (Edmund McMillen 2011)—a game without a queer narrative that still enacts queer “temporal and spatial configurations” (224). Content that is masked or coded as queer can still be very queer content, and the fact that that content relies on close analysis and interpretation does not diminish its ability to do the queer work of destabilizing norms. Lisa

Nakamura notes the value of such games in her interpretation of *Journey* (thatgamecompany 2012), which she argues does important social justice work by focusing on non-violent collaboration and including representations that invoke Middle Eastern clothing and disability (the game's avatars do not have arms). However *Journey* did not face the backlash from #GamerGate that other games more overtly connected with social justice agendas did, which leads Nakamura to claim that the game “shows us that games that underplay or even conceal their social justice agendas pass under the radar of gaming's most destructive players” (43). Games like *Vanishing* can do similar work by introducing players to queer experiences and content while avoiding some of the harassment that continues to happen in games. That sounds like a compromise because it is, but it can nevertheless contribute to queer games' ability to affect players and create more opportunities for queer representation.

As with *Gone Home*, *Vanishing* reveals the position of queer indie games in relationship to mainstream games, and queer developers and players' relationships to heteronormative gaming cultures. Specifically, *Vanishing* exemplifies how queer indie games that become popular and garner attention from gaming media must conform to a narrative of queer suffering and hardship, or code their queer content so it is not obviously queer. They get to be queer but only in ways that are constrained and recognizable (or just invisible) in popular culture, and the realities they imagine must always remain subordinate to heteronormativity. A similar conformity is often expected of queer players and developers, who are forced to hide or diminish their gender or sexuality in order to avoid harassment. In all of these ways, gaming cultures and even mainstream queer indie games perpetuate the issues of queer invisibility and stereotyping that Gross articulated almost twenty years ago with film and television in the twentieth century. The present absence of queer folks and their experiences remains a pernicious trend across

media, even as LGBTQ representation increases. Yet queer lives are more complex and varied than most representations portray or gaming cultures allow for, as the last game, *Fragments of Him*, suggests.

Fragments of Ourselves

The positive side of popular queer indie games focuses predominantly on suffering, hardship, and tragedy is the opportunity the games provide to reflect on queer experiences of loss and grief, and *Fragments of Him* is an excellent example of this. The game tells the story of Will, a bisexual man who dies in a car crash early in the game, and Sarah (his friend and ex-girlfriend), Harry (Will's boyfriend), and Mary (Will's grandmother) as they remember their times with Will and mourn his death. One of the major narratives in the game is Mary's inability to accept Will's sexuality, including several years when they are estranged because of it. Even when they reconnect later after Will cares for Mary following a fall, she still cannot support Will's love for Harry. The game does not portray much of this from Will's perspective, and it remains unclear how he felt about the way Mary behaves toward him. It is clear that Will still values his relationship with Mary, as he comments at one point, "tea solves everything, if you believe my Grandma." However the affectionate tone of this statement is quickly followed by "Grandma would have told me to man up." The juxtaposition of these two sentiments demonstrates the tension between love and judgment that the game constantly navigates in Will and Mary's relationship—a tension that is only resolved with Will's untimely death, which erases the problem that his sexuality poses for Mary.

While *Fragments of Him* is ultimately limited by the tragedy at the center of its narrative, it complicates queer representation by constantly portraying the many ways in which Will's

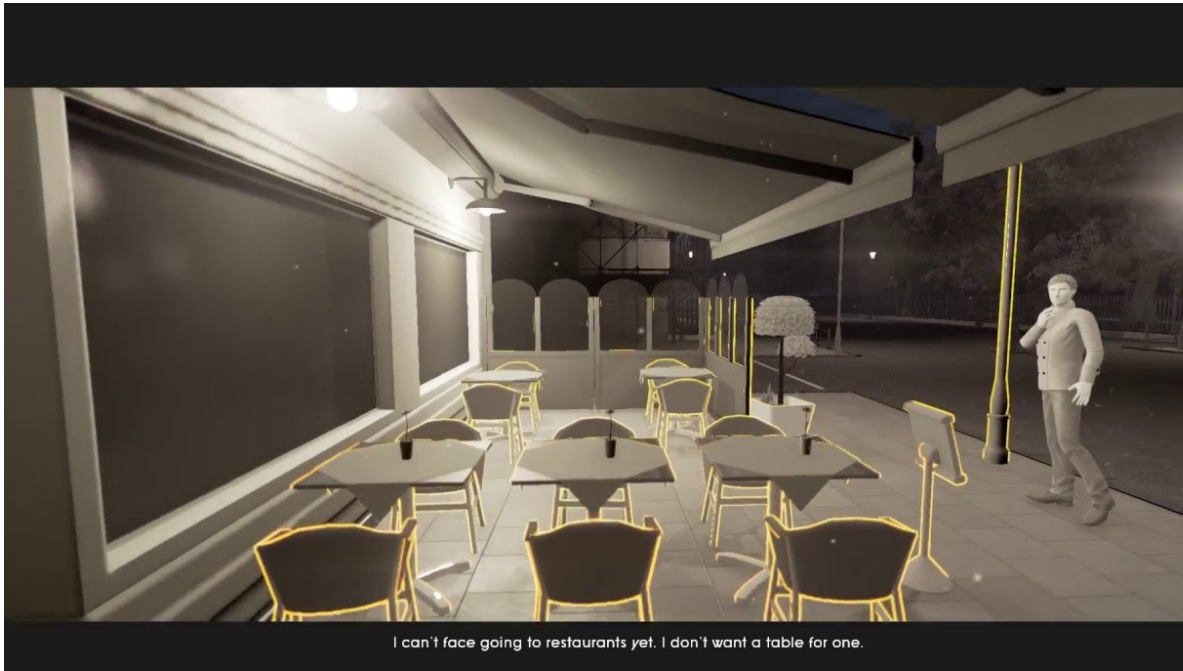


Figure 28. Interactive tables that trigger memory fragments and move the story forward.

sexuality is not the only thing that defines him. After Will and Mary reconnect toward the end of her story, she comments that she can never approve of his sexuality, but she also got “distracted by one part of him,” missing in the process the kind, strong man he grew up to be. This is effectively only a partial acceptance of who Will is, but it is one that acknowledges how gender and sexuality are only two parts (if significant parts) of who someone is. They are some of the fragments of who Will was, and they combine with other fragments of memory and identity that gave each character a different understanding of and love for him. The player gradually uncovers and pieces together more of these fragments as the game progresses by interacting with objects in the environment, and their understanding of Will evolves as each fragment falls into place in each story (Figure 28). The game’s mechanics operationalize an understanding of identity that is shifting, disjointed, and even queer: as Wood points out, queer experiences actively resist “heteronormative logics of wholeness and stable embodiment” (224). In this sense, no character in the game is limited to just being a token or a type. They grow and evolve, as Sarah does as her

relationship with Will develops from acquaintances to lovers to old friends, and their identities are never only their genders or sexualities. The living, dynamic, and complicated portrayal of identity in *Fragments of Him* thus contributes to challenging the simplistic view that identities such as race, gender, and sexuality are “discrete and stable categories,” and instead models how a playful approach to identity as moving and adaptable fragments could change the way we approach representation (Shaw 15).

As one considers the fragments of identity in *Fragments of Him*’s narrative or even in our own experiences, however, one must also grapple with the question of which fragments get represented more—which fragments get the most play, or seem the most important? In particular, the fragments of queer identity in this game are quite familiar because they fall into the same trends of representation present in *Gone Home* and *Vanishing*. While *Fragments of Him* includes a portrayal of queer love in its game space, that love is always framed by Will’s death as a love that is lost, a love without a future. In this sense, the fragment of identity that gets the most representation for queer folks in popular indie games is still defined by tragedy, grief, and loss. This fragment is a literal manifestation of Lee Edelman’s famous statement, “there are no queers in that future as there can be no future for queers” (29). Edelman used this idea to reject heteronormative teleologies and reproductive futurities that have been used to exclude and control queer peoples, but the trends of queer representation in popular indie games demonstrate that the denial of future possibility can be just as much of a trap for queer potentials. The narrative of queer suffering and hardship becomes a way for mainstream audiences to limit and control queer experience, denying it a future and keeping it contained to the past and the present.

An ever-present fragment of identity that gets no acknowledgment in *Fragments of Him*, *Vanishing*, or *Gone Home* is race, which in these games means whiteness. All of these popular

queer indie games focus exclusively on the experiences of queer white folks, without explicitly considering how race structures those experiences or how they might be different for queer folks of color. This is a significant problem because in their silence on race (intentional or otherwise), these games contribute to perpetuating the idea that whiteness is not a racialized identity, but rather an expected norm. Further, the games perform a siloing of identity in that they are recognized as games about gender and sexuality, but supposedly not about race (Shaw 77). The point here is not that the games should shoehorn in some dialogue about race in order to check an identity box, but rather that the current possibilities of queer representation in popular indie games are limited to a particular experience of queerness and whiteness. The queer realities that indie games imagine are almost always white realities, where persons of color are supporting characters if they are even present. Failing to recognize that continues to support white supremacy precisely when, as TreaAndrea Russworm argues, game studies should take seriously the role it must play in critiquing dominant ideologies (75). Game studies scholars must take up these critiques, and specifically draw attention to whiteness in games as a dominant ideology that often goes unquestioned.

Your Queer Spaces Are in Another Castle!

As these brief case studies demonstrate, mainstream queer indie games are doing the crucial work of representing queer experiences in games, but they often do so by limiting queerness to a narrative of pain, rejection, and death that is recognizable and approachable for cisgendered, heteronormative players. In these narratives, queer characters, spaces, and futures are shoved offscreen, out of play, and out of the realm of possibility. The point here is not that these games are wrong, or even that they engage in bad representation. To the contrary, these are

games the feature queer content in an industry that often minimizes that content if it includes it at all, and their developers, such as Steve Gaynor on *Gone Home*, are doing the labor of consulting with queer folks whose experiences they are trying to represent (Pavlounis 589). Rather, the point is to highlight the common themes and representations in mainstream queer indie games that are our current trends. These games reflect where we are right now culturally: where queer indie games stand at the margins of the games industry and sometimes become popular and reach a broad audience, and where they aim to better represent the LGBTQ community but only do so in part. They reveal that the cultural imaginary of what it means to live and play as a queer person is almost entirely limited by past and current realities of marginalization, oppression, and exclusion, and is further limited to predominantly white experiences of these things. Games industries and communities need these stories because they can bring attention to the homophobic and heteronormative systems that gaming cultures perpetuate in everything from excluding queer characters to bullying queer players. Indeed, one of the greatest advantages of making queer experiences more visible and accessible through mainstream queer indie games is it can raise cultural awareness of the various ways LGBTQ folks continue to be marginalized and silenced in games and elsewhere.

Yet queer lives are also so much more than suffering, hardship, and tragedy. To be sure, all of the games in this chapter have moments of queer beauty, love, and joy. For example, there are the moments that merrikk writes about in *Gone Home*: its “riot grrl romance,” its “zines” and “girl-band gigs” and dying your girlfriend’s hair (Kopas 148). However all of these moments are hauntings in the game’s space; they are things that happened there before that have been forced elsewhere now. And it is that elsewhere that queer indie games should continue to hunt for—the queer spaces, possibilities, and realities that we can imagine and make present in games

through play. It might be that those realities will not be found in mainstream queer indie games, where what queerness is and can be is limited by popular narratives and assumptions about queer experiences. It might also be that the queer realities we construct in indie games should not be accessible to the broader public. As Elizabeth LaPensée has said of indigenous indie games, not everything is *for* everyone, and sometimes games should remain in and for a given community (128). In this sense, the difference between mainstream queer indie games and other indie games is who they are for, and the smaller games that queer players and developers make for ourselves could be the places to look for queer realities beyond the hegemony of heteronormativity.

Accessible online platforms like Twine and Ren'Py, which are free and require minimal coding knowledge, can help us create our own games and tell our own stories, regardless of what sells or what others expect of us (Anthropy). At the same time, it is still worth engaging with and critiquing mainstream queer indie games because they are so tied to popular conceptions of queer experiences. If we do not challenge the common narratives of mainstream queer indie games, then they will remain limited to portrayals of difficulty and death.

I want to close this chapter with several lingering issues with current queer indie games, and an immense potential. The first issue is that current queer indie games that gain mainstream popularity largely limit queerness to “narrow definitions of gender and sexuality” that can actually form barriers for queer play and expression (Richard 85). Queer gender and sexuality in these games are always limited by heteronormative systems, and as a result are defined by suffering, hardship, and loss. The second issue is related to the first: the trend of relying on queer tragedy is especially problematic because it takes on a form of performing queer struggles for the benefit and entertainment of largely cisgendered and straight player audiences. This is effectively a form of identity tourism, allowing players to play in a queer experience, perhaps have an

affective relationship to that experience, and then move on (Pavlounis 588; Nakamura 55). In this sense, queer indie games that conform to a narrative of tragedy can allow players to exploit queer experiences for their own purposes, effectively engaging with queerness while keeping it at arm's length and negating any potential for change. Finally, queer representation in popular queer indie games is further constrained by its almost exclusive focus on the experiences of cisgendered white queer persons. The largely unquestioned predominance of whiteness and cisgenderedness in queer representation in games erases the experiences of trans and queer folks of color and forecloses on opportunities for intersectional and anti-racist imaginings of queerness in games (Nakamura 38).

What I argue for, then, is more queer games that imagine and make present queer realities that are not defined by tragedy, loss, and rejection. These games should not replace or diminish games that portray queer experiences of toxic and oppressive systems, rather they should add to them. The immense potential of queer indie games (including mainstream queer indie games) is that they could contribute to altering media representations of queerness and expanding the popular imaginary of what it means to be queer. In doing so, they could give new perspective “for what might be possible, how identities might be constructed, and what worlds we might live in” (Shaw 3-4). In order to realize this potential, we need queer games that create other worlds and realities where queerness is not restrained and diminished by heteronormative expectations. We need queer games that emphasize queer joy and life and beauty and power, things that are often born of hardship and difficulty in our actual worlds but that do not always need to be defined by them in our virtual ones. Queer game developers making games for themselves and their own communities, including developers such as Robert Yang, Mattie Brice, Dietrich “Squinky” Squinkifer, and so many others, are doing this work already, and often without the

recognition or compensation they deserve. As Bonnie Ruberg notes, indie game making is “financially precarious work, made more so for queer folks and others who are often already in positions of social and economic disadvantage” (Ruberg). These developers, and those starting to make their own queer games in recent years, need our support. Support for queer indie games could take the financial forms of becoming a patron on Patreon or buying queer games on itch.io, or community forms of playing and spreading the word about queer games that do not get mainstream journalistic coverage.²⁶

Ultimately, what I hope for queer indie games is what Anna Anthropy describes: “What I want from videogames is a plurality of voices. I want games to come from a wider set of experiences and present a wider range of perspectives” (loc 147-148). Indie games can provide a space for such a plurality to emerge because tools like Twine and platforms like itch.io open game development up to folks who do not have specialized training or the resources of large companies and studios. In indie games different queer voices can tell their own stories and be heard, and in that indie games can play a role in critiquing and changing dominant, mainstream cultures. Yet this transformative potential will never be realized if the only narrative of queerness with purchase in mainstream queer indie games and the popular cultural imaginary is one of tragedy and hardship. In indie games and beyond, let us continue the hunt for queer spaces—spaces where queer folks can live, and love, and play.

²⁶ Patreon is a platform that allows creators and artists to fund their work with subscription-based services, paying monthly or by video, game, or other text. Itch.io is a website for hosting, selling, and downloading indie games. A great place to start supporting queer indie games is on itch.io with games with the queer tag: <https://itch.io/games/tag-queer>.

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Epilogue: Queerer Narrative, Queerer Play

“Another story, kid. What else?” —Paul Prospero, *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter*

Narrative has always been a tool for making sense of experiences and constructing realities, and video games are no exception. Video games are a continuation of narrative in new media and virtual spaces where stories take on new forms and allow us to play with possible interpretations and outcomes. In this sense, games also help us see how narrative operates in other media in a new light—how we organize and sequence signs into narrative as we read a novel or watch a film, shaping an understanding of a text’s reality in doing so. Of course the means and experience of this process are quite different in different media, and games are distinguished by requiring the player to choose between various paths and configure the shape of the narrative as a game progresses. Yet the difference between narrative in games and other media is not that between simulation and narrative, interactivity and non-interactivity, or play and fixedness, as many have argued. The view of narrative in games as an external element, be it threat or boon, has hampered the study and creation of games for too long, to harmful effects. Narrative is already here and always has been, and we can use it to generate realities of all kinds—particularly, hopefully, more socially just ones.

As the case studies here have shown, unfortunately the narrative realities built in existing games are often far too limited, constraining the possible ways of playing and being and excluding many people in the process. Mainstream queer games rely extensively on a narrative of white queer hardship and loss that is familiar and safe for heteronormative players. Beyond queer games, gaming cultures continue to rely on “narrow definitions of gender and sexuality” such as the male/female binary and traditional gender roles in representation, and gaming communities still engage in the widespread narrative that gamers are straight, white, male, and

non-disabled, while employing “gatekeeping and marginalizing practices” such as trolling and harassment to target players who are not (Richard 85). For players who do not fit these expectations, the representations of their identities and communities in game narratives are often stereotypes, if they are represented at all. As Kishonna Gray notes of narratives in video games and popular culture broadly, “media portrayals offer singular visions of marginalized lives, behaviors, and roles within society. Specifically, blackness is consistently underrepresented and/or misrepresented across various media” (62). A new theory of narrative in games cannot solve these issues alone, but by bringing a renewed attention to the narrative construction of reality it can help demonstrate why representation matters and offer tools for changing dominant narratives.

The potential for narrative to change the status quo is a major reason gamer culture remains so opposed to it, and there is little sign of that changing in recent years. For example, events surrounding the recent *World of Warcraft: Battle for Azeroth* (2018) game expansion show how segments of the gamer community continue to resist (sometimes violently) the validity and worth of narrative in games, particularly when narrative means stories that are not about white men. In the lead up to the expansion, the game’s developers, Blizzard Entertainment, announced a renewed focus on storytelling in the game and hired Christie Golden, an author who had written several tie-in novels for the franchise, to join the team as a Senior Writer and help direct narrative design (Harper). As the expansion release neared, the company posted several videos highlighting the major characters in the lore of the new game, and, for the first time in the game’s history, all of them were women. The response from some gamers was swift and often vile. Many decried the shift in storytelling as “terrible” and “lazy” writing, and some took to Twitter to harass Golden and send her death threats (Jones). It was not just that the new

expansion was too narrative, it focused on women and therefore was *bad* narrative, and someone (i.e. a woman daring to write about women in games) needed to be punished for it. Of course most of the gamers participating in attacking Golden likely do not see their criticism or even harassment in these terms—as Betsy DiSalvo argues, many white male gamers “do not see gender or race because they are situated in a position of being the social norm and, consequently, their behavior is considered and extant of the normal” (DiSalvo 114). Yet every part of these events from the game content that spurred them to the target of the attacks points to the intersection of gender and narrative, and demonstrates that narrative continues to pose a gendered threat to gamer culture.

As frustratingly familiar as all of this is for those playing and studying games at the margins, the fact that a major game like *World of Warcraft* is starting to center women in its narratives suggests there is room for hope. Representation and narrative in games are changing, if painfully slowly and at great cost. At E3 2018, the annual event when major companies in the game industry show off their new hardware and games, Sony revealed a trailer for the upcoming *The Last of Us Part II* (Naughty Dog 2016), an action-adventure game set in a post-apocalyptic zombie world. The trailer featured the game’s protagonist, Ellie, intimately dancing with and kissing another woman, Dina. The kiss was a watershed moment for many queer players because, as Shaw, Rudolph, and Schnorrenberg write, “Finally we see a lesbian couple, one of whom is the protagonist, kissing in a mainstream game in a manner that is clearly not for the male gaze” (130). While there are certainly good reasons to remain skeptical of a major game company’s investment in queer representation, the trailer was a brief glimpse of a world where LGBTQ folks can take center stage, rather than being shunted to the side or out of the picture entirely. Even more encouraging is the exponential growth of queer games and narrative games

in the past decade. Queer and trans indie developers such as Anna Anthropy, Mx. Dietrich Squinkifer, Zoyander Street, and Brianna Lei have created games that imagine many different forms and possibilities for queerness, and new developers join their ranks every day as more queer folks use games to tell their stories. The increase in the number of queer games has been mirrored in the establishment of queer game studies as a subfield of game studies in recent years, with conferences such as The Queerness and Games Conference (QGCon) emerging to bring together scholars, developers, and players in the queer games community. In her reflection on QGCon in the landmark *Queer Game Studies* collection, Bonnie Ruberg describes the flurry of activity at such events as “impossibly beautiful and also impossibly brief,” a respite from the ongoing toxicity of gaming cultures that evinces the “value of even the most fleeting of welcoming spaces” (269, 273). These moments of community and relationship, whether they be at a conference of gaymers, in playing a queer indie game, or on a screen between two characters, are the glances of what games could be, of what our narratives can shape them to be.

What is needed now is more work (and play!) that makes these moments more common and allows us to realize the futures and realities that we imagine. The narrative theory proposed here contributes to this project by helping us see how narrative shapes our experiences and constructs our realities through play, and further provides a framework for using narrative to generate other possible ways of playing and being. Narrative is not just a fixed series of signs and events represented in a game, it is also the embodied cognitive process of interpreting and organizing those signs and events in order to make sense of what we encounter. This process is always variable, emergent, and playful to at least some extent, and as a result it always has queer potentials. And because it is mediated by bodies and situated in cultural contexts, it is always affected by systems of identity and power such as gender, sexuality, and race. By recognizing all

of these interwoven elements of narrative, this theory allows us to center variation and difference, deconstruct dominant modes of play, and build new realities through narrative. Future work with this theory could focus in on particular game genres and play spaces to explore how signs come together in various narrative configurations in different situations and contexts. For example, the case studies included here are drawn predominantly from narrative-focused games with little or no combat or competition, and investigating how these narrative processes operate in other types of games such as multiplayer online battle arenas (MOBAs) would likely yield new concepts and modifications for the theory. Another promising avenue for future research is working with players to account for how individual players understand and use narrative differently in their play experiences. A further study of the queer potentials for game narrative using recent scholarship on queer interfaces, controllers, and other software and hardware could also produce novel ways of designing and representing queer experiences by rejecting the “usability paradigm” and normative expectations in games (Clark 140). These are only a few of the many possible paths forward in the study of game narrative, and undoubtedly many more will emerge as developers, players, and scholars continue to invent new forms of narrative and play.

My greatest hope for this theory of narrative is that it will assist in confronting interlocking systems of power and exclusion in games and other digital spaces. The narratives that perpetuate such systems will not change quickly or easily, and we must be wary of thinking that more queer people on screen will solve everything or that swapping in some queer characters without attention to the lived experiences of queer folks is enough progress. Naomi Clark points out that the dream of mere inclusion is often the “easy seduction of being just like everyone else, trading second-class citizenship for first while others still die without care, medicine, or justice” (Clark 139). Yet by directly challenging hegemonic narratives and

continuing to find and play other stories in games we can come closer to realities that recognize and celebrate difference. As Lisa Nakamura argues, “Frank critique of gaming’s inaccessibility to women and minorities is absolutely necessary; the resistance within gaming culture to overt identification with social justice is the ‘final boss’ that must be beaten” (44). Thankfully, there are many scholars, developers, and players fighting this boss, and there are more every day. Narrative is an arrow in the quiver and a spell in the spellbook for the fight, and, judging by gaming cultures’ responses to it, it’s super effective, particularly in the hands of queer folks, women, and people of color. Through narrative we can understand and share our various experiences, and this “allows us to push forward because we feel we are pushing together, challenging and supporting one another, making new worlds” (Ruberg 273). Other, more socially just worlds are possible, and by telling and playing our stories and listening to and fighting for our differences, we can work to realize them.

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