LUDOLOGICAL STORYTELLING AND UNIQUE NARRATIVE EXPERIENCES IN
SILENT HILL DOWNPOUR

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I examine the relationship of ludology and audience agency to the narrative structure of video games, specifically by examining the ludological narratives of the games in the *Silent Hill* series, with a focus on the most recent entry in the franchise, *Silent Hill Downpour*. While much has been written about the conflict between narratology and ludology in video games scholarship, I propose an alternate way of studying games; one that acknowledges the variety of gaming experiences available and recognizes the necessity of tailoring methodological approaches to specific types of games. This experientially-tailored view of studying games acknowledges the structured narrative experiences found in the medium while also taking into account the importance of player interaction and the role that player agency can have on the direction and eventual outcome of a specific player’s narrative experience. Alongside an in-depth structural analysis of the narrative in *Silent Hill Downpour*, I examine the ways in which the loyal fans of the *Silent Hill* franchise discuss the franchise’s narrative elements online through internet message boards and social media, allowing a more focused analysis of how individual player experiences affect an audience’s perception of narrative structure and what this might tell us about reader-response theory, participatory fandom, and culturally-specific methods of decoding.
For Mom, with love.
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INTRODUCTION

In this thesis, I examine the relationship of ludology and audience agency to the narrative structure of video games, specifically by examining the ludological narratives of the games in the Silent Hill series, with a focus on the most recent entry in the franchise, Silent Hill Downpour. While much has been written about the conflict between narratology and ludology in video games scholarship, I propose an alternate way of studying games; one that acknowledges the variety of gaming experiences available and recognizes the necessity of tailoring methodological approaches to specific types of games, rather than viewing all available game experiences through one critical lens. Leading game theorist Espen Aarseth himself acknowledges the variety of gaming experiences available:

To address computer games as a consistent genre or medium is highly problematic. From Tetris on a mobile phone to Super Mario on a Gameboy to Everquest on a Midi-tower Windows machine there is a rather large span of different genres, social contexts, and media technologies. It cannot be repeated often enough that the computer is not a medium, but a flexible material technology that will accommodate many very different media.¹

This experientially-tailored view of studying games acknowledges the structured narrative experiences found in the medium while also taking into account the importance of player interaction and the role that player agency can have on the direction and eventual outcome of a specific player’s narrative experience, thereby utilizing a hybrid approach of narratological/ludological methodologies. Alongside an in-depth structural analysis of the...

narrative in *Silent Hill Downpour*, I examine the ways in which the loyal fans of the *Silent Hill* franchise discuss the franchise’s narrative elements online through internet message boards and social media. This focus on the fan community allows me to closely analyze how individual player experiences affect an audience’s perception of narrative structure, as well as suggesting what this might tell us about reader-response theory, participatory fandom, and culturally-specific methods of decoding.

Ultimately, my question is: How do video games structure narrative experiences while allowing for player agency, and what does fan discussion of these narrative experiences tell us about the narrative potential of the medium and the importance of individual-specific narrative experiences in the eyes of fans, players, and game developers? I argue that when players are able to impact the narrative direction of the games they play, they are allowed to focus on narrative elements that most closely reflect their own personal beliefs and experiences. Online discussion provides fans with the opportunity to express themselves by writing about the narrative experiences they encountered while playing the game. The implementation of varied narrative experiences into the video game text, I will argue, represents a shift in cultural perceptions of authorship, participation, and narrative - one that privileges interactivity and individualized media experiences.

My study will focus almost entirely on the *Silent Hill* franchise, with much of my discussion and analysis centered specifically on *Silent Hill Downpour*. My reasons for choosing the *Silent Hill* series are many: as a long-running franchise with eight total games released since 1999, *Silent Hill* has had a continued presence in the video game community and has evolved alongside the rapid development of the medium. Furthermore, the *Silent Hill* franchise has one of the most loyal and most active video game fan communities on the Internet, with several fan-
sites and message boards available for research. Fueling this large and vocal community is a series of games whose narratives are, in many ways, purposefully ambiguous; the combination of narrative ambiguity and player agency featured in the *Silent Hill* series is key to dissecting the player-specific narrative experiences I plan to focus on. Furthermore, as a series that has been lauded for its narrative maturity (and often credited with bringing sophisticated stories to the medium), *Silent Hill*’s narratological reputation is almost without peer in the video game world.

The intense experiences offered by the *Silent Hill* series have been recognized by game theorists such as Bernard Perron, who points out that “the extraordinary power of *Silent Hill*, as many reviewers have noted, lies in the fact that the series isn’t simply a game but rather a uniquely powerful emotional experience.”² In fact, *Silent Hill*’s ambitions to offer a unique gaming experience make it an ideal candidate for exploring those possibilities of the medium that have, for the most part, been untouched. Games scholar Ewan Kirkland notes several qualities of the series that situate it well within, yet simultaneously separate from, traditional understandings of the video game form: “While undoubtedly obstacle-based, action-driven, and progress-led, *Silent Hill* variously deviates from traditional gaming conventions...traditional motivation is weak, as is cause and effect logic.”³

*Silent Hill* games further allow space to explore unconventional narrative structures, making it a productive site for the aforementioned synthesis of narratological and ludological approaches to critically analyzing the medium as a whole. The series has a long tradition of offering compelling narratives that do away with traditional storytelling techniques, largely through the incorporation of player agency and its impact on narrative direction. Bernard Perron

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notes the intentional disruption of traditional conceptions of narration through the incorporation of player agency on the part of the developers of 2001’s Silent Hill 2: “When asked how he would like Silent Hill 2 to be seen, the producer Akihiro Imamura answered: ‘As a horror movie, but with the fantastic feeling of being active within it’.”^4 This destabilization of traditional narrative techniques through the empowerment of participatory users has only increased as the series has continued to evolve, as Perron acknowledges in his analysis of 2009’s Silent Hill: Shattered Memories:

“SH: Shattered Memories remains a true self-reflexive game...You meet characters you got to know before and go to places you have already been, yet everything is changed from your memories...If your actions and answers to Dr. Kaufman’s little therapy games change the way the characters appear, so will the locations the player character can access and the scenes you’ll see. This design is also reminiscent of the ultimate goal of interactive fiction, which wanted to make the reader a writer of the story.”^5

Thus, the Silent Hill series has a long and evolutionary tradition of offering cohesive narrative experiences that incorporate player choices and actions in the practice of story-plotting. Optional narrative information, explorable virtual space, and multiple endings are just some of the ways Silent Hill has experimented with traditional notions of narrative techniques, shaping them to more ideally fit the interactive nature of the video game medium.

While the series as a whole offers a great deal of content worthy of analysis, there are several reasons for focusing specifically on Silent Hill Downpour. As the most recent entry in the franchise, it allows for the timeliest discussion, and subsequently the fan discussion concerning this particular game is much more active than those focused on older games in the series.

^4 Perron, p. 16
^5 Perron, p. 93
*Downpour* also represents the most modern take on the *Silent Hill* franchise, with advancements made in terms of both gameplay and storytelling techniques; indeed, *Downpour*’s emphasis on player agency and choice allows for the most tailored narrative experiences seen in the series thus far, a fact that has been noted by video game critics and fans alike. This is important, I believe, not only because it allows players more control in shaping their personal narrative experiences, but also because it allows more room to chart the growth in video game narratology from the beginning of the series to its most recent entry.

Alongside the textual analysis of the *Silent Hill* video game series, I evaluate feedback and discussion from the *Silent Hill* fan community. This fan feedback, much of it focused on debates over the stories and plots of the many games of the *Silent Hill* series, is helpful in examining the fluidity of video game narratives and the reflection of personal beliefs and values in narrative interpretations. This fan discussion will be drawn from online sources, with special attention paid to fan-made websites and message boards such as *Silent Hill Heaven*, *Rely on Horror*, *Silent Hill Historical Society*, and others. I will also be drawing from the personal blog written by *Silent Hill Downpour* producer and co-writer Tomm Hulett, which features a variety of information concerning his role in the creation of *Silent Hill* games and his thoughts on video game narratology and authorship.

Each of the following chapters focuses on a specific point of analysis in an attempt to create a larger view of the issues of video game methodologies, narrative structures, and participatory fandom. The first chapter, *The Ludological/Narratological Compromise and its Implications for Video Game Authorship*, discusses the debate surrounding video game narratology and ludology and serves as both a literature review and a clarification of my own views on the debate; this is important, because clarifying my position on this debate is essential
to understanding both my analysis of the narrative structure of *Silent Hill Downpour* and the ways in which fans can interpret, dictate, and otherwise influence their own narrative experiences while playing video games. I summarize the key points of both narratological and ludological methodologies, citing influential writers such as Janet Murray, Espen Aarseth, Gonzalo Frasca, Henry Jenkins, and others, while proposing an alternate view: a spectrum of experience-based analysis that favors the construction of specifically-tailored analytical lenses to account for the variety of game types and genres available. This theoretical model allows room for strictly narratological and/or ludological views, while also acknowledging the fact that many games incorporate key concepts discussed in both schools of thought. The construction of this alternate analytical model will allow for a discussion of the narrative experiences of *Silent Hill Downpour* that recognizes the importance of both the game’s narrative structure and its player interaction and participation.

The second chapter, Foundations of Participatory Authorship in *Silent Hill Downpour*, offers a close reading of the narrative structure of *Silent Hill Downpour*, with special attention paid to the ways in which player agency, virtual space, and optional scraps of narrative information affect the narrative experience encountered by the player. Specifically, this analysis focuses on how players are able to construct protagonist Murphy Pendleton as either a heroic or villainous character through a variety of participatory means. A thorough examination of *Downpour* is essential to understanding how video game narratives can be structured to allow for player manipulation, as well as to lay out the variety of narrative possibilities offered for fan discussion. Much of this analysis focuses on charting the flow of the game’s narrative, pointing out when, where, why, and how the game’s narrative forks into divergent paths. In addition to this analysis, I also offer my own interpretations of the game’s many narrative ambiguities,
focusing not on the *correct* answer, but rather pointing out how each divergent path in the game’s narrative structure could allow for several *possible* answers.

The third chapter, The Synthesis and Evolution of Participatory Culture, Interpretation, and Cross-Cultural Reading in *Silent Hill Downpour*, focuses on fan discussion concerning the narratives of the *Silent Hill* series, specifically *Silent Hill Downpour*. I’m not concerned with finding out what the *correct* answer is, but rather with how people interpret or reconcile their *own* narrative experiences with those of other fans. Why do fans interpret certain events differently? Why did one player make one choice, while another player made the opposite choice? How would one fan summarize the story, and how does that differ from another fan’s summary? With a loyal and vocal fanbase, there is a wealth of discussion concerning the narrative possibilities offered by ludological storytelling in video games, and these narrative possibilities allow for the reflection of personal experiences, values, and beliefs most clearly seen in this kind of fan discussion. I utilize the work of reader-response theorist Stanley Fish, Henry Jenkins’ thoughts on fandom and participatory culture, and Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz’s study of culturally-specific decodings of the popular television series *Dallas* to explain how an active, interpretive, culturally-heterogenous fanbase represents not just a reflection of pre-existing notions of active audiences, but an evolution and intensification of them.

Ultimately, this thesis is concerned with understanding how video games reflect, alter, or reconcile pre-existing notions of narrative, interactivity, participatory culture, and reader response theory. A continuum-based model for studying games that favors experiences rather than the polemical views of narratology and ludology allows for a space in which games such as *Silent Hill Downpour* can offer compelling narratives with a particular emphasis on players as key agents in the construction of their own narrative experiences. This is reflected in an analysis
of the game’s narrative structure, which offers a framework within which players are able to build their own stories through optional content, sidequests, and interpretative strategies. Fan discussion of these narrative experiences reveals media consumers who have come to expect a certain degree of agency in mediated narratives, and the developers of Silent Hill Downpour, as media producers, recognize this desire. Ultimately this thesis points in the direction stories are going in a digital, post-modern age, in which no story is set in stone and each user is able to manipulate narrative experiences to more closely resemble his or her own beliefs and values.
CHAPTER I:

THE LUDOLOGICAL/NARRATOLOGICAL COMPROMISE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR VIDEO GAME AUTHORSHIP

The methodological approach to studying video games stands at a bit of a crossroads, one that has persisted since academics first set their sights on the medium as a subject worthy of analysis in the mid-1990s. While some scholars continue in the tradition of film and literary studies, viewing video games as an evolution and extension of more “traditional” media, others believe a new approach is needed; one that recognizes the specificity of the video game medium and places a greater importance on the role of players as participatory agents in video game play. Leading hypertext theoretician Stuart Moulthrop acknowledges this methodological split, noting that “we have reached a fork in the road. Beyond this point the traditional narrative interest leads one way, while a second track diverges. We do not yet have a very good name for this other path, though we can associate some concepts with it: play, simulation, and more generally, game.”

Those who wish to apply cinematic and literary analytical techniques to games are collectively known as narratologists: scholars who believe the primary purpose of video games is to tell stories. Because of this, they believe pre-existing methodologies of studying plot, representation, and semiotic analysis can, with a certain amount of modification to allow for the unique properties of the video game medium, be applied to the study of games. The scholars who wish to view video games as a completely new and unique medium have come to be known as ludologists, whose application of play theory to the study of games has led them to view video

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games less as narrative media and more as user-oriented games, more on par with chess or soccer than film or literature.

While these two schools of thought have been locked in an academic debate over the methodological future of video game studies, games have continued to evolve. In fact, the rapid development of video games as a medium in the past fifteen years has rendered much of the early writing about games woefully obsolete; like the internet, many of the optimistic predictions for the future of video games have not come to pass, while in other ways the medium has evolved in directions that could not have been foreseen by early video game theorists. Because of both the oppositional deadlock between narratologists and ludologists and the subsequent evolution of the video game medium, a reformulated approach to video game studies is needed; one that allows for both narratological and ludological methodologies and considers the current state of the video game medium. By examining both narratological and ludological approaches to the study of video games, a synthesized approach to analyzing games can be created. This hybrid approach recognizes the medium’s capacity for the delivery of compelling narrative experiences while allowing for the importance of gameplay mechanics and the role of the player as a participant in the construction of game narratives. This incorporation of both narratological and ludological methodology places a greater emphasis on the notion of interactivity, displacing game developers as god-like authors of video game texts and replacing them with gamers who, operating within the programmed virtual space of video games, are allowed to fashion their own narrative experiences from the plethora of options made available to them by the game.

In order to reach this hybrid approach to the study of video games, I provide here a brief discussion of narratology and ludology, with special attention paid to those points that are particularly divisive. From there, a compromise can be struck in the form of a continuum of
available game experiences, one that allows for games that fit the theories and views of narratologists and ludologists, but also recognizes those games that fall somewhere between the two schools of thought. This will open a theoretical space in which to explore the intertwined notions of interactivity and authorship, which will then be extended in an analysis of Silent Hill Downpour’s narrative structure and fan community in the succeeding chapters.

**Narratology**

For narratologists, the most important aspect of the video game experience is the story. Janet Murray, arguably the leading video game narratologist, asserts that narratives are a foundational aspect of the human experience: “we rely on works of fiction, in any medium, to help us understand the world and what it means to be human.” Murray and her fellow narratologists see the video game medium as an extension of this human need to tell stories as a way of understanding the world around us, one that flows sensibly from more “traditional” media to the new media of video games: “[N]ew narrative traditions do not arise out of the blue. A particular technology of communication...may startle us when it first arrives on the scene, but the traditions of storytelling are continuous and feed into one another both in content and in form.” Narratologists believe the video game medium is perfectly capable of, and even uniquely suited to, the presentation of narrative experiences; as Murray points out, gaming “is a medium that includes still images, moving images, text, audio, three-dimensional navigable space --more of the building blocks of storytelling than any single medium has ever offered us. So gamemakers can include more of these elements in the game world.”

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8 Murray, 1997. p. 28
9 Murray, Janet. “From Game-Story to Cyberdrama.” *First Person: New Media as Story,*
incorporate more of these narrative elements, Murray maintains that games are capable of telling new kinds of stories; stories that better reflect the human condition in the digital age:

To be alive in the twentieth century is to be aware of the alternative possible selves, of alternative possible worlds, and of the limitless intersecting stories of the actual world. To capture such a constantly bifurcating plotline, however, one would need more than a thick labyrinthine novel or a sequence of films. To truly capture such cascading permutations, one would need a computer.\footnote{Murray, 1997. p. 38}

For Murray and many other narratologists, then, the video game and similar digital formats represent an extension of our ability, as humans, to make sense of our world through stories, and even represent an evolution of narrative media, with storytelling possibilities heretofore unseen and unexplored: “The technical and economic cultivation of this fertile new medium of communication has led to several new varieties of narrative entertainment...This wide range of narrative art holds the promise of a new medium of expression that is as varied as the printed book or the moving picture.”\footnote{Murray, 1997. p. 28}

Murray may be seen as guilty of overstating the importance of the medium or overreaching its potential; \textit{Hamlet on the Holodeck}, her influential study of the storytelling potential of digital media such as video games, was published in 1997--when video games were just becoming technologically capable of telling stories that were visually and dramatically on par with literature or film. Setting aside the arguably outdated predictions of early narratologists, however, leaves us with a technical analysis of the video game as a storytelling medium, one that

has not only maintained its relevancy but has been reinforced by the state of modern video games. Perhaps the most compelling of Murray’s points for the purpose of this study is her assertion that stories and games often function similarly, with the same end-goal in mind. This conflation of games and narrative is suggested by Murray through a structural analysis:

Games and stories have in common two important structures, and so resemble one another whenever they emphasize these structures. The first structure is the contest, the meeting of opponents in pursuit of mutually exclusive aims...Most stories and most games include some element of the contest between protagonist and antagonist. The second structure is the puzzle, which can also be seen as a contest between the reader/player and the author/game-designer. Most stories and most games include some contest elements and some puzzle elements.12

Murray further attempts to break down the distinction between games and narrative, suggesting that “stories and games are also both distanced from the real world, although they often include activities that are done ‘for real’ in other domains...Stories and games are like one another in their insularity from the real world, the world of verifiable events and survival-related consequences.”13 For Murray and her fellow narratologists, then, stories and games serve the same social function: a way of experiencing events through a mediated process in an effort to make sense of the world we inhabit. In fact, Murray sees the very act of game playing as a narrative in and of itself, one that utilizes narrative tropes in an attempt to impose a kind of reality-based rule-set: “Every game, electronic or otherwise, can be experienced as a symbolic drama. Whatever the content of the game itself, whatever our role within it, we are always the

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13 Murray, 2004. p. 3
protagonists of the symbolic action...”\textsuperscript{14} For Murray and many narratologists, then, games and stories are not diametrically opposed but are, in fact, one and the same; this view is supported by Murray’s controversial reading of \textit{Tetris} as a narrative experience: “Games are always stories, even abstract games such as checkers or \textit{Tetris}, which are about winning and losing, casting the player as the opponent-battling or environment-battling hero.”\textsuperscript{15}

Of course, because modern video games exhibit so many of the narrative building blocks identified by Murray above, they act as an extension of the shared relationship between games and stories. Characters, dialogue, and even branching narrative paths are often inherent to the video game experience, creating a synthesis of filmic or literary techniques and Murray’s notion of game-as-narrative. One important development in the understanding of video games as narrative experiences was that of the “cut-scene.” A brief cinematic interlude that traditionally precluded the player from interacting with the game, the cut-scene was (and still is) often used to relay important narrative information: character interaction, the condensing of temporal and spatial divides, and important back-story information are all present in video game cut-scenes. These cut-scenes are clearly inspired by cinematic structure, and effectively serve as mini-vignettes in which the important narrative information of a game is given to the player. The “hands-off” style of early non-interactive cut-scenes was a point of contention among video game players and critics: while they are used to provide narrative structure to gaming experiences, they also tend to get in the way of the player’s enjoyment of the game itself. Games scholar James Newman recognizes this, pointing out that “[o]ne consequence of these protracted sequences to players of contemporary videogames...is that a considerable amount of their time is spent engaged in activity we might not instinctively consider as ‘playing’. In fact, to all intents

\textsuperscript{14} Murray, 1997. p. 142
\textsuperscript{15} Murray, 2004. p. 2
and purposes, these sequences, along with the cinematic act of cutting, might easily be considered ‘narratives’.

While the cut-scene is an important narrative tool in video games, it also seems diametrically opposed to the very idea of a video game; if a player effectively has to put down a controller and cease interacting with the game during a cut-scene, a divide between narrative and gameplay is clearly established. More modern games, however, manage to circumvent this issue in a variety of ways. While traditional cut-scenes are still present in many games, others use different means to impart narrative information: idle chatter of non-playable characters (or NPCs), interactive cut-scenes, including those in which the player chooses his or her own dialogue from a list of possible options, and, as will be seen in an analysis of *Silent Hill Downpour*, textual documents and side-quests that are dependent on player exploration and interactivity. Because of these developments in video game storytelling techniques, the divide that once existed between gameplay and narrative has been broken down.

Of course, cut-scenes are only one way in which narrative information can be relayed to the player. In fact, much video game structure closely follows narrative techniques, with gameplay serving as (re)enactments of pivotal scenes or events. Gaming theorist Diane Carr, in her analysis of the classic role-playing game *Baldur’s Gate*, points out how much of the video game experience is reminiscent of the process of narration:

*Baldur’s Gate* insists on storytelling. Under the fluctuating layers of played, saved, replayed and played-over events, there is a baseline of conventionally structured narrative that retains its plotted order, regardless of the player’s actions. For example, while exploring a village that the player has been directed to, the team comes across a character named Minsc...Minsc and [his ‘witch’] Dinheira have a relationship that pre-exists the

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player’s arrival. Their situation, personal histories and personalities are recounted to the player, and cannot be altered...These elements conform to, or at least strongly resemble, conventional narration.17

While, as an analysis of *Silent Hill Downpour* will prove, Carr’s assertion of “a baseline of conventionally structured narrative that retains its plotted order” has been problematized somewhat by the variable narratives of modern games, her assertion that most games offer some kind of narrative framework within which play is structured and which is unaffected by gameplay is an important one to consider. Indeed, many games use stories as contextual motivation for the gameplay, with some games merging gameplay sequences into storytelling sequences without any of the story/game divide of traditional cut-scenes.

*Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater*, for example, features a climactic motorcycle-chase sequence in which the player defends himself while an AI (artificial intelligence) controlled character drives the motorcycle. While this scene has precedents in certain “on rails” shooting sequences of prior games like Sega’s jet-fighting game *After Burner* and the driving/shooting hybrid *Lucky and Wild*, it also offered a highly dynamic (and downright chaotic) gameplay sequence that operates outside the traditional notions of gameplay as established throughout the rest of the game. In fact, while controlling and shooting the main character used the game’s familiar mechanics, the context of those mechanics was much more in line with those traditionally seen in cut-scenes. Other games, such as those in developer Naughty Dog’s *Uncharted* series, represent a similar evolution of the relationship between gameplay and cut-scene; whereas traditionally players would see protagonist Nathan Drake escape a burning building or sinking ship through a cinematic cut-scene, players of *Uncharted 3: Drake’s*

Deception were able to act out those scenes in the context of gameplay rather than non-interactive cut-scenes. This merging of the cinematic aesthetics and structure normally seen in cut-scenes with the interactive nature of gameplay suggests that games have evolved beyond the notions of games-as-stories established by Janet Murray and her fellow narratologists; in fact, in many games - particularly more modern ones - there ceases to be any division between the two.

**Ludology**

The opponents of narratological theory, known collectively as ludologists, maintain that at the very least the narrative function of games is secondary, while at worst the experiences of gameplay and narrative are diametrically opposed to one another. Utilizing aspects of play theory, ludologists see games first and foremost as games, with rule-sets and gameplay mechanics taking the place of stories and narrative structure as the primary purpose of video games and, accordingly, the most important avenue of academic research. James Newman contrasts the methodology of ludology with that of narratology:

> ‘ludic’ or play(er)-centred approaches to the study of videogames have attempted to foreground the activity of play in their analysis of games, gamers, and gaming. In this regard, they stand in contrast to so-called ‘narratological’ approaches in videogame study where the game is seen to be positioned as a text to be read.\(^\text{18}\)

Newman’s summary of the ludological approach is borne out by the thoughts of Espen Aarseth, arguably the leading ludologist: “Any game consists of three aspects: (1) rules, (2) a material/semiotic system (a gameworld), and (3) gameplay (the events resulting from application

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\(^{18}\) Newman, p. 94-95
of the rules to the gameworld).”¹⁹ For Aarseth and other ludologists, narratological issues are either a product of gameplay or cease to exist at all --some of the more extreme ludologists have argued that the structures of play and narrative are incompatible with each other. James Newman summarizes many of the key differences between narrative texts and games in the eyes of ludologists:

For adherents of ludic approaches to the study of videogames, collectively known as ‘ludologists’, narratological strategies are problematic for a variety of reasons. Chief among them centres on the apparent concentration on the ‘text’, and specifically the text as a static entity from which meaning can be deduced. For ludologists, it makes no sense to talk of the videogame text, in part because it cannot be seen to be constituted without the activity and action of the player. It is players who breathe life into and make sense of videogames.²⁰

Ludologists believe that the importance of the user, both in the interaction with the game and in the player’s influence on the shape of the game’s structure through that interaction, supersedes any understanding of the video game as a narrative text. Because the user is an active participant in the game world rather than a passive receiver of information, ludologists claim that video games cannot be understood as texts in the traditional sense. Without accepting her argument that games and stories are essentially one and the same, ludologists focus on Janet Murray’s proposal that “Games seem on the face of it to be very different from stories and to offer opposing satisfactions. Stories do not require us to do anything except to pay attention as they are told. Games always involve some kind of activity and are often focused on the mastery of

²⁰ Newman, p. 95
Espen Aarseth seems to take this suggestion as established truth, and forms a ludological approach to video game studies from there. As Aarseth points out, the importance of the user should not (or cannot) be diminished in any consideration of the video game medium:

“Instead of a narrated plot, cybertext produces a sequence of oscillating activities effectuated...by the user. But there is nevertheless a structuring element in these texts, which in some way does the controlling or at least motivates it. As a new term for this element I propose intrigue, to suggest a secret plot in which the user is the innocent, but voluntary, target.”

Thus, ludological approaches to the study of video games stress not the importance of the text, as is seen in narratology, but rather the importance of the user as an active participant in the mediated experience offered by games. As Jon Dovey and Helen W. Kennedy, editors of *Game Cultures* have noted, “The ludologists’ mobilization of cultural history, psychology, anthropology and systems theory has served to remind us that games are not static media texts - they are activities.”

One of the primary differences between games and narrative texts that ludologists point to is the status of a game as a *simulation*: According to Espen Aarseth, the process of simulation offered by video games is one of the key factors distinguishing the medium from narrative texts:

The hidden structure behind...most...computer games is not narrative - or that silly and abused term, ‘interactivity’ - but simulation. *The computer game is the art of the simulation*...Indeed, it is the dynamic aspect of the game that creates a consistent

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21 Murray, 1997. p. 140
gameworld. Simulation is the hermeneutic Other of narratives, the alternative mode of discourse, bottom up and emergent where stories are top-down and preplanned. In simulations, knowledge and experience is created by the player’s actions and strategies, rather than recreated by a writer or moviemaker.\footnote{Aarseth, 2004. p. 52. Emphasis in original.}

Central to a ludological understanding of video games is Aarseth’s displacement of an authorial power dictating a narrative experience; the player is, according to ludologists, too active within the game for such a power to exist. Gonzalo Frasca, a leading ludologist credited with coining the term “ludology,” stresses the importance of simulation in the study and understanding of video games: “[U]nlike traditional media, video games are not just based on representation but on an alternative semiotical structure known as simulation. Even if simulations and narratives do share some common elements (characters, settings, and events) their mechanics are essentially different.”\footnote{Frasca, Gonzalo. “Simulation versus Narrative: Introduction to Ludology.” The Video Game Theory Reader. Eds. Mark J.P. Wolf and Bernard Perron. Routledge, New York. 2003. Pgs. 221-235. p. 222} Frasca believes games need to be understood not as narratives, but as simulations; as such, the defining characteristic of games, and the quality most worthy of study, is the creation and implementation of the game’s rules: “Unlike narrative, simulations are not just made of sequences of events, they also incorporate behavioral rules.”\footnote{Frasca, p. 227}

According to Frasca, ludologists argue that the ways in which simulations generate rules provides a deeper level of semiotic meaning than those found in more traditional representations. Frasca points out a distinction between the two in an example of a model plane:

Traditional media are representational, not simulational. They excel at producing both descriptions of traits and sequences of events (narrative). A photograph of a plane will
tell us information about its shape and color, but it will not fly or crash when
manipulated. A flight simulator or simple toy plane are not only signs, but machines that
generate signs according to rules that model some of the behaviors of a real plane.\textsuperscript{27}

It is important to understand these differences between representation and simulation for a
variety of reasons, not the least of which is that, as Frasca alludes to above, simulations are
manipulable. Again, the participatory user is privileged in the ludological model, and the
simulated experience, by allowing such participation, is differentiated from that of a
representational (or strictly narrative) experience.

The experience of the user is crucial to understanding games as simulated experiences; as
such it is helpful, as Frasca points out, to consider both the phenomenology of gameplay and its
effect on the mediated experience of playing games:

To an external observer, the sequence of signs produced by both the film and the
simulation could look exactly the same. This is what many supporters of the narrative
paradigm fail to understand: their semiotic sequences might be identical, but simulation
cannot be understood just through its output. This is absolutely evident to anybody who
played a game: the feeling of playing soccer cannot be compared to the one of watching a
match.\textsuperscript{28}

In studying video games, then, it is important to understand that they can serve as simulated
experiences, ones that implement and even require an active user to generate meaning. The
importance placed on the user by ludologists is especially relevant to a discussion of \textit{Silent Hill}
\textit{Downpour} because of its displacement of authorial control in favor of a greater emphasis on user
participation. This is an important consideration because, as Frasca points out, video games offer

\textsuperscript{27} Frasca, p. 223-224
\textsuperscript{28} Frasca, p. 224
something other media do not: “Traditional narrative media lacks the ‘feature’ of allowing modifications to the stories...” (Frasca, Pg. 227) This aspect of ludological methodology is key in the analysis of the narrative structure of *Silent Hill Downpour* and its placement of players as the authors of their own narrative experience.

**The Narratology/Ludology Divide**

These arguments between proponents of narratology and ludology have, far from benefitting game studies, left it mired in bi-partisan methodologies. Many writers, James Newman among them, have commented on this split, noting that “the issues of narrative - and, by inference, the audience for narrative - have caused considerable consternation in both the academic and practitioner videogame studies communities. Even though the discipline is in its infancy, a schism has already emerged between ‘narratologists’ and ‘ludologists’.”

This split is often concerned with the semantics of narratology and play, with proponents from both sides unable to offer a clear and convincing analysis of the differences between narrative and interactivity. Steven Poole, journalist and author of the game studies volume *Trigger Happy*, summarizes the distinction that led to this methodological split:

unlike a film or book, a videogame changes dynamically in response to the player’s input. Surely this must mean something drastic for the traditional concept of a story, authored jealously by one godlike writer? Two extreme responses, for example, might be: videogames are so radically different from stories that there can be no comparison; or videogames have the magical, catalytic ingredient that will change our conception of what a story is.”

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29 Newman, p. 91
Narratologists see video games as the next step in storytelling, one that may necessitate a revised understanding of the word “narrative,” but that clearly draws from pre-existing storytelling traditions:

Just as there is no reason to think of mystery novels or role-playing games as merely versions of chess, there is no reason to think of the new forms of storytelling as extensions of film-making or board games, though they may include elements of all of these. Storytelling and gaming have always been overlapping experiences and will continue to be so.\(^{31}\)

Ludologists, on the other hand, are concerned that the specificity of the video game medium and, more specifically, the importance of the active user are in danger of being overlooked in favor of older, more established methods of media analysis. Espen Aarseth notes a concern among ludologists that narratology may in effect be trying to shape the fundamental nature of games to fit preconceived notions of narrative analysis:

The sheer number of students trained in film and literary studies will ensure that the slanted and crude misapplication of ‘narrative’ theory to games will continue and probably overwhelm game scholarship for a long time to come. As long as vast numbers of journals and supervisors from traditional narrative studies continue to sanction dissertations and papers that take the narrativity of games for granted and confuse the story-game hybrids with games in general, good, critical scholarship on games will be outnumbered by incompetence, and this is a problem for all involved.\(^{32}\)

Thus, the two loudest voices in theoretical game studies stand opposed to one another; while both sides offer compelling evidence for their claims and interesting insights into the formal

\(^{31}\) Murray, 2004. p. 8

\(^{32}\) Aarseth, 2004. p. 54
features of video games and gameplay as a mediated experience, they are also in danger of being too entrenched in methodological bickering to see and acknowledge the large variety of game experiences available for play and academic study.

Both ludologists and narratologists seem to be more interested in the future of video games than the present; while this is an understandable concern, it risks outright dismissal of current games in favor of those experiences that are expected to be more common or successful in the future. Espen Aarseth exemplifies this potential pitfall in his dismissal of some of the games frequently cited by narratologists as examples of video game narrative:

The weak and repetitive tradition of adventure story-games such as Myst and Half-Life should not be given our privileged, undivided attention, just because they remind us more of the movies and novels we used to study. Compared to replayable games such as Warcraft and Counter-Strike, the story-games do not pose a very interesting theoretical challenge for game studies, once we have identified their dual heritage. There are so many more important aesthetic questions to ask of better and more successful games, in particular multiplayer games.33

Setting aside Aarseth’s problematic suggestion that some games (particularly the ones he and other ludologists prefer to study) are “better” than others, his proposal that different types of games warrant different types of study is an excellent, even essential one. In fact, much of ludology’s knee-jerk dismissal of narratology seems to come, at its source, not from a difference in methodology but rather from a difference in the kinds of games each side of the debate prefers to play, study, and analyze. It seems necessary, then, to suggest an alternative model of studying video games, one that allows for the views of both narratologists and ludologists to co-exist

33 Aarseth, 2004. p. 54
while acknowledging the fact that the variety of gaming experiences available to us precludes the wholesale application of a single methodological framework.

**The Spectrum of Gaming Experiences**

My suggestion for this alternative model of game studies avoids the polemical nature of the ludology/narratology divide by instead implementing a spectrum of analysis based not on a single methodology, but on the range of experiences provided by video games themselves. It seems foolish to construct a methodology and then try to find ways to apply it to as many games as possible; instead, the games themselves must necessitate our methodological approach. Video games are, after all, a varied medium that inhibits the wholesale application of a single theoretical framework. James Newman points out that, “like television, the videogame cannot be considered as a technology or medium used solely on an individual basis outside any kind of context for its use...the webs of intersubjective relationships within which media texts reside not only highlight the difficulty of understanding or predicting meaning but also problematize the notion of a medium’s intrinsic or fixed potentials.”³⁴ Recognizing the variety of experiences on hand and remaining methodologically flexible enough to study those experiences on their own merits helps us to avoid some of the potential pitfalls Newman warns of: “the enormous variety of titles and types collectively assembled under the heading of ‘videogames’ means that critical approaches and theories are at risk of being unduly influenced by particular instances that may come to stand for the whole field.” (Newman, Pg. 92) As such, it’s important to clarify that some games are, in fact, narratological as the term is defined by videogame narratologists such as Janet Murray, while others can be seen as strictly *ludological*. Others, however, manage to represent both schools of thought in such a way that, at the very least, a compromise must be

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³⁴ Newman, p. 96
found between competing categorizations; it is this compromise that the proposed spectrum of experience-based analysis seeks to offer.

Surely, narratology and ludology have much to offer this model; in fact, they stand at opposite ends of the spectrum, with one side representing narratological approaches to game study, acknowledging the storytelling ambitions and practices of many games such as the aforementioned *Uncharted* series, while the other side represents ludological approaches to game study, including those games that act as simulated experiences with interactivity given precedence over story. *The Sims* and many sports games lie more in this direction. Many games, however, lie somewhere between the two poles: these games offer over-arching narrative experiences that allow for the participation of the user by either allowing for narrative variability or encoding gameplay itself with narratological meaning. Many ludologists resist such compromise, arguing that gameplay and rule-sets exist as distinct entities completely separate from any narratological context; Espen Aarseth, for example, decries the fervor of study that focused on the gendered representation of *Tomb Raider*’s buxom protagonist Lara Croft: “the dimensions of Lara Croft’s body, already analyzed to death by film theorists, are irrelevant to me as a player, because a different-looking body would not make me play differently.”

Aarseth’s criticism of film theorists who focus merely on *Tomb Raider*’s Lara Croft as representation is justified, though he overlooks the fact that narrative, aesthetic character design, and rule systems are frequently constructed in a cooperative fashion with one ultimate goal in mind. The “stylish action” of *Devil May Cry* for example, features a synthesis of these three elements working towards one common goal: making the player feel, for lack of a better word, *cool*. Thus, players control Dante, a white-haired rogue in a red trench coat (character) who, as a half-human half-

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35 Aarseth, 2004. p. 48
demon hybrid, hunts down and executes villainous demons (narrative) using a variety of weaponry that can all be used to create awe-inspiringly long combinations of varied and stylish attacks (gameplay). Character design, narrative, and the rules of gameplay all work in tandem to present the “stylish action” that the game became known for; any major alteration to any of these three components (making Dante a balding, heavyset, middle-aged man; replacing Dante’s backstory with something less exciting such as, say, a job at the post office, or offering a combat system that was sluggish, unresponsive, and slow) would result in a significant reduction in the creation of “stylish action” and the overall sense of cool that the game, as a complete package, was acclaimed for, as well as fundamentally altering the meaning of each individual component by recontextualizing it. Thus, Devil May Cry offers a gaming experience in which narratological and ludological elements are intertwined; any separation of the two is impossible, as they both contribute to the meaning of the game as a unified experience.

Similarly, strictly narratological approaches to game studies are problematic. Media scholar Henry Jenkins recognizes the potential pitfalls that could arise from viewing games simply as narrative experiences:

Not all games tell stories. Games may be an abstract, expressive, and experiential form, closer to music or modern dance than to cinema...To understand such games, we need other terms and concepts beyond narrative, including interface design and expressive movement...The experience of playing games can never be simply reduced to the experience of a story. Many other factors that have little or nothing to do with storytelling per se contribute to the development of great games and we need to significantly broaden
our critical vocabulary for talking about games to deal more fully with those other
topics.\textsuperscript{36}

Jenkins makes an important point here: in even the most narratively focused video game, there’s
a great deal more going on than what film and literary studies can allow for; the notion of an
active user put forth by the ludologists, in tandem with ideas of games as narrative, would allow
for the synthesis of approaches Jenkins claims is necessary. It would be equally foolish,
however, to ignore the fact that many (even most) games do tell stories, and so the wholesale
application of ludological theory without any consideration of this runs the risk of missing a
rather large piece of the puzzle. As Jenkins points out, “Many games do have narrative
aspirations. Minimally, they want to tap the emotional residue of previous narrative experiences.
Often, they depend on our familiarity with the roles and goals of genre entertainment to orient us
to the action, and in many cases, game designers want to create a series of narrative experiences
for the player.”\textsuperscript{37} What is needed, then, is an example of a game that incorporates both
narratological and ludological elements, one that provides a compelling narrative experience
while also allowing for the importance of an active user who is able to manipulate the game
world through his or her actions. \textit{Silent Hill Downpour} stands as an ideal example of the kind of
game that resides in the middle of the spectrum of experience-based analysis, one whose
implementation of an active user complicates traditional notions of narrative and authorship
through the process of interactivity.

\textsuperscript{36} Jenkins, Henry. “Game Design as Narrative Architecture.” \textit{First Person: New Media as
Story, Performance, and Game}. Eds. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan. The MIT Press. Cambridge,

\textsuperscript{37} Jenkins, 2004. p. 119
Interactivity, Agency, and Narrative Architects

The term interactivity is one that has, perhaps, been overused; as such, finding consensus on its exact meaning and/or its importance in the field of video game studies is an exercise in frustration. Still, the term is useful and, due to the lack of any better word to describe the process of game play, must remain central to any user-based discussion of video game studies. James Newman identifies the importance of the concept of interactivity while similarly acknowledging its problematic over-use: “Where novels, newspapers and cinema ‘create’ readers, the interactive audience is immediately empowered and placed at the centre of these new media experiences. However, the uncritical use of the term [‘interactive’] in a variety of contexts...has rendered it a fluid designation.”

Interactivity is easy to grasp but difficult to define; at its most basic level, interactivity implies the ability of a user to implement significant changes on a mediated experience through pre-existing modes of reception. Thus, a video game player can enact changes on the game world through the game’s normal game play processes (without the help of hacks, mods, or cheats). Newman helps to clarify how interactivity can be understood in video games as opposed to traditional narrative texts:

[I]t is [the] facility of the player through some manipulation exacted during their performance of play, such as the imposition or implementation of a rule, for example, to affect a transformation on the game or ‘text’ that defines the interactivity of forms such as the videogame...the game...responds to the effort and activity of the player.

This notion of interactivity was taken up by Janet Murray, who sought to reconcile it with the narrative potential of the video game medium by morphing it into the concept of player agency:

“When the things we do bring tangible results, we experience...the sense of agency. Agency is

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38 Newman, p. 26
39 Newman, p. 26
the satisfying power to take meaningful actions and see the results of our decisions and choices.” Murray differentiates between agency and interactivity, noting that agency entails more than just pushing a button: “Because of the vague and pervasive use of the term *interactivity*, the pleasure of agency in electronic environments is often confused with the mere ability to move a joystick or click on a mouse...Agency...goes beyond both participation and activity.”

Murray believes that agency is an important component of narrative-based gaming experiences. In reference to the classic adventure game *Zork*, Murray asserts that

> [T]he fantasy environment provided the interactor with a familiar role and made it possible for the programmers to anticipate the interactor’s behaviors. By using these literary and gaming conventions to constrain the players’ behaviors to a dramatically appropriate but limited set of commands, the designers could focus their inventive powers on making the virtual world as responsive as possible to every possible combination of these commands.

While Murray’s suggestion that agency can be accounted for in the construction of narrative experiences, her placement of the game’s developers and programmers as the most important element in the construction of player agency is perhaps a problematic one; after all, how much agency do players really have if all of their choices have to lead to a predetermined outcome regardless of the choices made?

This potential pitfall can be avoided through an application of a more ludologically-oriented methodology, one that acknowledges that player agency is dependent not just on seeing

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40 Murray, 1997. p. 126
41 Murray, 1997. p. 128
42 Murray, 1997. p. 79
actions reflected in the game world but on experiencing the game world in whichever way the player sees fit. Murray, in fact, seems to view agency largely as a dramatic tool, one that she does not acknowledge as existing outside of her game-as-narrative viewpoint:

Agency is the term I use to distinguish the pleasure of interactivity, which arises from the two properties of the procedural and the participatory. When the world responds expressively and coherently to our engagement with it, then we experience agency...In an interactive story world, the experience of agency can be intensified by dramatic effect. If changing what a character is wearing makes for a change in mood within the scene, if navigating to a different point of view reveals a startling change in physical or emotional perspective, then we experience dramatic agency.  

This view of agency as merely a narratological tool has become a bit outdated with the relatively recent rise of open-world sandbox-style games such as the popular Grand Theft Auto series. Now, players are free to enact changes on the game world in ways which may not be related to the game’s main plot. In his analysis of Abe’s Oddysee, for example, games scholar Gareth Schott notes that

players’ engagement with a game can take many forms. Despite the strong narrative objective - the salvation of Abe’s fellow-workers - Abe’s Oddysee can be read on several levels, visually, emotionally and thematically. The world can be explored at will, and seemingly incidental details or characters are made the subject of play ‘for its own sake’. Although these choices and potentials are all encoded within the game system and the

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43 Murray, 2004. p. 10
visual design of the game, it clearly permits forms of personal agency during the activity of play that are not confined to the achievement of a singular objective.\textsuperscript{44}

Thus, it is important to consider the active role a player takes in the game world outside of the singular objective of the game’s overarching narrative structure. The precedent for this kind of agency is, as noted by Henry Jenkins, the implementation of explorable space. According to Jenkins, this space is often loaded with narrative significance in a variety of ways:

Environmental storytelling creates the preconditions for an immersive narrative experience in at least one of four ways: spatial stories can evoke pre-existing narrative associations; they can provide a staging ground where narrative events are enacted; they may embed narrative information within their mise-en-scene; or they provide resources for emergent narratives.\textsuperscript{45}

Jenkins sees the creation of explorable space, encoded with narrative potential, as an ideal compromise between the overbearing finality of narratology and the loosely-structured playing of ludology. It is through the exploration of and movement through this space, Jenkins argues, that gameplay can be linked with narrative meaning:

We may have to battle our way past antagonists, navigate through mazes, or figure out how to pick locks in order to move through the narratively impregnated mise-en-scene. Such a mixture of enacted and embedded narrative elements can allow for a balance between the flexibility of interactivity and the coherence of a pre-authored narrative.\textsuperscript{46}

\textsuperscript{45} Jenkins, 2004. p. 123
\textsuperscript{46} Jenkins, 2004. p. 126-127
Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Jenkins’ thoughts on narrative space (and certainly the most important to an analysis of *Silent Hill Downpour*) is the idea of video game space as a canvas for narrative (re)construction on the part of the player:

In the case of embedded narratives, the game space becomes a memory palace whose contents must be deciphered as the player tries to reconstruct the plot. And in the case of emergent narratives, game spaces are designed to be rich with narrative potential, enabling the story-constructing activity of players. In each case, it makes sense to think of game designers less as storytellers than as narrative architects.47

Acknowledging this use of digital space as a “memory palace” in which players construct the game’s narrative experience allows us to transition from the concept of agency to that of authorship. Because if we accept Jenkins’ suggestion that game designers function “less as storytellers than as narrative architects,” the ultimate responsibility for the authoring of narrative experiences through gameplay must fall on the players themselves.

**Displacing the Author**

The concept of user-response as the location of cultural meaning is certainly not unique to the medium of video games. Reader response theorists such as Stanley Fish have long argued that the meaning of a text comes not from the text itself but rather from a reader’s response to the text: “…[T]he reader’s response is not to the meaning; it is the meaning, or at least the medium in which what I wanted to call the meaning comes into being, and therefore to ignore or discount it is…to risk missing a great deal of what is going on.”48 Central to Fish’s location of meaning in a reader’s response to a text is the lack of determinate meanings within the text. Reader-response

47 Jenkins, 2004. p. 129

48 Fish, Stanley. *Is There a Text In This Class? The Authority of Interpretative Communities*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA. 1980. p. 3
theorist Walter Benn Michaels identifies the potential sources and importance of determinate meanings within cultural texts:

…[D]eterminate meaning may come from the author (in which case the text is understood to mean what the author intended it to mean), it may be located in the text itself (the text means what it says), or it may be a function of ‘literary competence’ (the text means what the community of professional readers says it means) – the only thing that matters is that the meaning be determinate, not subject to the whims of individual readers.49

Fish’s assertion is that there are no determinate meanings, and that all meaning is construed through a reader’s (or a community’s) interpretative lens. This lack of determinate meanings has serious consequences, as it displaces a text and its author(s) as a position of authority in the production of meaning: “…[A]uthority depends upon the existence of a determinate core of meanings because in the absence of such a core there is no normative or public way of construing what anyone says or writes, with the result that interpretation becomes a matter of individual and private construings none of which is subject to challenge or correction.”50 Of course, Fish is dealing with a highly-interpretable but still static text: while reader response to a particular poem may change depending on the readers themselves, the poem will remain unchanged and unaffected by each reader’s interpretation. Keeping Fish’s notions of reader-response theory and the loss of authorial authority in mind, however, is key to understanding how video game players can transform interactive agency into personal narrative authorship.

50 Fish, p. 317
Diane Carr identifies the relative positions of senders and receivers of messages within media texts: “The implied author occupies a controlling, ‘sending position’ within the narrative text. Then, at the receiving end, is the implied reader: the target of the message being transmitted...” Carr applies this concept to video games, and in doing so raises an important question: “When investigating narrative in games, it is...necessary to ask who instigates events. Who determines their duration, frequency or order?” As the above discussion of player agency has shown, players often, through interactive processes, assume the sending position within the video game text, relaying orders and commands to the game world, thereby enacting dramatic changes. During these instances, then, the player assumes the role of the implied author as defined by Carr. It is pointed out by Carr herself, however, that these established conceptions of the position of senders and receivers of messages are often flexible in video games: after all, a player can enact a change on the game world one minute, then respond to a given command or narrative information the next. Carr suggests that “rather than conflating the various sender and receiver positions within the game text under encompassing designations, it is more productive to regard them as a set of distinct, multiple positions, any of which might be offered to or imposed on the player by various aspects of the game, at different times.” Thus, traditional notions of authorship and reader are problematized by the very nature of video games; these designations are fluid, mutable, and subject to change at any moment.

Ludologists like Gonzalo Frasca support Carr’s hypothesis through their analysis of games as simulations. Frasca differentiates between traditional narrative authors, whom he calls

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51 Carr, p. 37  
52 Carr, p. 43  
53 Carr, p. 41
“narrauthors,” and the authors of simulated experiences, or “simauthors,” in the construction of video game experiences:

To use a metaphor, narrauthors ‘train’ their stories so they will always perform in an almost predictable way. By contrast, simauthors ‘educate’ their simulations: they teach them some rules and may have an idea of how they might behave in the future, but they can never be sure of the exact final sequence of events and result. The key trait of simulative media is that it relies on rules: rules that can be manipulated, accepted, rejected, and even contested. Narrauthors have executive power: they deal with particular issues. On the other hand, simauthors behave more like legislators: they are the ones who craft laws. They do take more authorial risks than narrauthors because they give away part of their control over their work.\(^{54}\)

The ludologists’ assertion that games act as simulations that react to user input displaces traditional notions of authorship; this idea is a reflection of Henry Jenkins’ suggestion that game designers act more as “narrative architects” than as authors in the traditional sense. In this displacement of authorial control, then, the sole responsibility for the sequencing and construction of narrative experiences must fall on the player.

Narratologists reject this notion of authorship, believing that the programmers who create the variables of a given narrative experience are the sole producer of meaning in a video game experience. Janet Murray identifies this kind of authorship as procedural authorship:

Authorship in electronic media is procedural. Procedural authorship means writing the rules by which the texts appear as well as writing the texts themselves. It means writing the rules for the interactor’s involvement, that is, the conditions under which things will

\(^{54}\) Frasca, p. 229
happen in response to the participant’s actions...The procedural author creates not just a set of scenes but a world of narrative possibilities.55

Murray seemingly avoids the complication of the construction of meaning presented by reader-response theorists by asserting that “In an interactive medium the interpretive framework is embedded in the rules by which the system works and in the way in which participation is shaped.” (Murray, 1997. Pg. 89) While Murray is correct to assert the importance of rule-sets and formal structures in contributing to the creation of meaning in gaming experiences, reader response theorists such as Stanley Fish would take issue with her assertion that these features are where interpretive framework lies; in fact, the interpretive lens through which players view and interact with the game is more likely to contribute to the construction of such a framework. Thus, the interpretive framework of a gaming experience comes not from the game itself, but from the gamer. This is no different than Fish’s claims that meaning comes not from literary texts but from interpretative lenses fashioned by readers and critical communities.

Still, many game theorists support Murray’s notion of procedural authorship, and many games do, in fact, bear it out. The gaming community reacted with near-universal rage when, upon the release of the long-awaited Mass Effect 3, the series concluded in such a way that the myriad of choices made by players had no effect on the game’s narrative ending. Other games offer player choices that affect the game world, but either have no discernible impact on the game’s narrative or introduce only incremental, branching-style changes. For example, Infamous allows players to be either good or evil through a variety of moral decisions and gameplay styles but does not account for this decision in the overall construction of the game’s plot. Knights of the Old Republic allows players to affect the game’s narrative, but the choices and their eventual

consequences have overly-obvious connections: choosing to kill a character rather than helping them-turns your character to the dark side of the force, which leads to a darker ending. Diane Carr’s analysis of *Baldur’s Gate* similarly reinforces the inevitably of narrative, even in the face of player agency: “[N]o matter how well we play, Gorion will be ambushed and killed, and no matter how pathological we decide our protagonist is, the game will still tell us that after Gorion’s death he or she is shocked and grieving.”56 This illustrates an important distinction between those games with linear narratives and those with variable narratives: while players of *Baldur’s Gate* may achieve success through varied means, their actions and decisions ultimately have little to no effect on the outcome of the narrative. Players of *Silent Hill Downpour*, by contrast, are able to shape the game’s narrative in a variety of ways, so that the exact course of the game’s narrative, as well as the ways in which the game’s narrative pieces are constructed into a whole, are the responsibility of the player rather than any authorial power, implied or otherwise. Murray’s idea of procedural authorship was correct for its time period and still holds true today in many instances, but it does not account for all of the offered game experiences, particularly those that reside in the middle of the spectrum of game-experiences, such as *Silent Hill Downpour*.

It is helpful here, amidst the conflicting views on the definition and nature of authorship, to clarify the structure of traditional narratives, particularly the terms *story* and *plot*. James Newman identifies a distinction between these two narrative qualities, pointing out the importance of distinguishing between the two when discussing video game narrative:

[S]tory refers to all the events in a narrative whether explicitly presented or inferred by the viewer, while...plot refers to the causation that, by indicating a linkage between

56 Carr, p. 44
various story events, provides the justification for their depiction in relation to one another. In a sense, the story can seem to happen ‘on its own’, without too much help from a reader; but the chain of causation constituting plot requires a significant amount of work.  

It is helpful to understand this distinction between story and plot, because while elements of a story may be put in place by videogame developers and authors, the elements of a plot are often structured by a player through decisions, actions, interpretations, or any combination of the above. Thus, the story of Silent Hill Downpour remains the same: convict Murphy Pendleton becomes trapped in Silent Hill and must face judgment for his actions. The plot of the game, however, is completely modifiable by the player, and in many ways, the adjustment of the plot can even lead to huge modifications of the story. One possible narrative experience, for example, could lead a player to conclude that Murphy never even entered Silent Hill, and that the entirety of the game was the insane delusion of an unstable supporting character. Gaming theoreticians Marc Santos and Sarah White recognize the importance of the player and gameplay in the construction of the game’s overarching plot:

...If our first role involves moving the character around and directing his/her proairetic action, then our second role involves providing the ontological meaning for that movement, granting our actions a hermeneutic structure, ordering an infinite amount of events into a seemingly coherent unity, or in simplest terms, supplying the story with a plot.  

57 Newman, p. 97 
Thus, while the *story* of a game may be established by a structured game world, the creation of the *plot* is, at least in some games, the responsibility of the player.

Even the notion of a fixed, stable story produced by a game’s developers can be problematic in the case of multiple endings. Janet Murray dismisses this by claiming that every story has one “ultimate” ending that acts as a story’s conclusion:

> A linear story, no matter how complex, moves toward a single encompassing version of a complex human event. Even those multiform stories that offer multiple retellings of the same event often resolve into a single “true” version - the viewpoint of the uninvolved eyewitness or the actual reality the protagonists wind up in after the alternate realities have collapsed. A linear story has to end in some one place: the last shot of a movie is never a split screen.\(^{59}\)

As will be seen in a detailed analysis of the narrative structure of *Silent Hill Downpour*, however, video games are able to offer multiple endings, none of which is necessarily the “correct” one. This, in fact, is entirely up to the player, who in fact manipulates the story’s conclusion through his or her actions and decisions. With this notion of a definite end problematized, Murray’s notion of procedural authorship begins to appear less stable in the face of modern video game narratives:

> There is a distinction between playing a creative role within an authored environment and having authorship of the environment itself. Certainly interactors can create aspects of digital stories...But interactors can only act within the possibilities that have been

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\(^{59}\) Murray, 1997. p. 136
established by the writing and programming...all of the interactor’s possible performances will have been called into being by the originating author.\textsuperscript{60}

This assertion that interactors are but participants in the narrative world structured by the author is one that follows Murray’s belief that all narratives - interactive or otherwise - must reach a definitive end. This assertion does not allow for a variety of user-specific narrative experiences, such as those offered by *Silent Hill Downpour* and, furthermore, does not seem to consider the fact that what gamers are most interested in is not the gameworld presented by the developer, but rather their own individual experiences within that gameworld. My analysis of the *Silent Hill* fan community in Chapter 3 will bear this observation out, but it’s worth noting here: while the developers of *Silent Hill Downpour* are responsible for the creation of the game world and all of its narrative content, they have little to no control over what pieces of optional (and potentially impactful) narrative information a player interacts with or collects, and even less control over the construction of the interpretive lens through which each gamer views his or her experience within the game world. Thus, the developers may be the authors of *Silent Hill Downpour*, but each player is the author of his or her own experience within the world the developers have created. No gamer would claim to have created *Silent Hill Downpour*, just like no *Star Trek* fan would claim to have participated in the creation of the show just because they wrote fan fiction. But each gamer does aid in the creation of his or her own narrative experience within that game world, and in the formation and retelling of that experience is operating from a position of authorship.

Strangely enough, Murray’s optimism for the future of video game narratives may be somewhat soured by her reluctance to utilize ludological methodologies. By adhering to strict

\textsuperscript{60} Murray, 1997. p. 152
notions of narrative structure and traditional conceptions of authorship and overlooking or minimizing the importance of user participation in the creation of highly-personalized narrative experiences, Murray misses the fact that engrossing, personally-tailored narrative experiences are already being offered by video games, particularly those that lie in the middle of the spectrum of game-experiences between the oppositional forces of ludology and narratology. Murray’s suggested question about the future of interactive narrative, encouraging though it may be, is aimed in the wrong direction: “Our question...should be, How can we make this powerful new medium for multiform narrative as expressive of the writer’s voice as is the printed page?” By placing such a focused emphasis on the authors of digital narratives and video games, Murray is overlooking a vital piece of the puzzle: the importance of gamers. As the following chapters will show, the construction of meaning lies not in the hands of the developers of Silent Hill Downpour, but rather in those of fans who navigate the game’s labyrinthine narrative structure and come out the other side eager to discuss their own experiences with others who took a similar yet uniquely personal trip through the world of Silent Hill.

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61 Murray, 1997. p. 204
CHAPTER II:

FOUNDATIONS OF PARTICIPATORY AUTHORSHIP IN SILENT HILL DOWNPOUR

The academic study of video games has been embroiled in a debate concerning the narrative possibilities of the medium; some theorists believe that games are capable, even in their most basic form, of telling compelling and satisfying narratives, while others believe games should be seen as extensions of play theory, and thus fail to exert authorial control due to participant input. The question of narratology in video games, and just who is in control of the stories being told in this particular medium, may lie somewhere in between these two schools of thought: indeed, the participatory nature of the medium may allow for the construction of narratives that are dictated by the players themselves. I maintain that video games can, in fact, deliver satisfying narrative experiences whose outcome is dependent on the actions, choices, and interpretations of the player. This approach to interactive narratives still relies on a somewhat rigid framework, but it must balance that narrative framework with an allowance for varied experiences based on player choices and the inclusion of optional narrative content; essentially, the game must give the player all of the puzzle pieces, but allow them to assemble those pieces into a narrative whole that reflects their own experiences, beliefs, and values; the assembled narrative “puzzle” will then be a unique experience dictated by the players themselves. To examine the ways in which this free-form distribution of narrative elements can be experienced in practice, I will analyze the construction of the player-controlled narrative present in Silent Hill Downpour, particularly the ways in which players are able to construct the game’s protagonist, Murphy Pendleton, as either a heroic or villainous character through the manipulation of morality choices and the acquisition and thematic interpretation of optional narrative content.
The Keys to Participatory Authorship

Transitioning from player agency to player authorship, as seen in *Silent Hill Downpour*, is reliant on a combination of three vital factors. Any one factor in and of itself is not necessarily unique to the medium of video games, and will not afford the player the creative agency that leads to narrative authorship; only through a combination of these three factors will the user gain the ability to write their own story. The first of these key factors is the inclusion of a fluid narrative framework from which all players share a starting point. This framework would seem to imply authorial control on the part of the game’s developers, and to a certain extent this is the case; but as we will see, the framework upon which the narrative is based is open to manipulation and interpretation on the part of the player. As noted by Barry Ip, many video games adhere closely to the formulaic “Call to Adventure” portion of the hero’s journey as outlined by Rollings and Adams.\(^\text{62}\) By adhering to a similar framework, *Silent Hill Downpour* gives players a familiar formula from which they are free to devise their own experiences using any of the included narrative content. Players are given a basic outline of Murphy’s journey, but how they will respond to each of the steps, and what impact they will have on the totality of the game’s narrative, is entirely up to them. This use of such a universal formula limits the developers’ authorial control over the progression of the story (subsequently shifting that control to the player), while still offering players a framework upon which their own narrative experiences can be built.

The second key factor in transitioning authorial control from developers to players is the utilization of divergent narrative paths structured around player agency. The game must give the player the opportunity to affect the narrative’s ultimate outcome through factors influenced by

player decisions and actions; in the case of Silent Hill Downpour, this takes the form of a “secret score” that influences your earned ending based on morality choices and player behavior. This branching approach to game progression is certainly not unique to the Silent Hill series. As noted by games scholar Barry Ip,

> The principal advantage offered by a nonlinear approach is greater freedom, where the player is given the impression that a greater degree of control may be exerted over the progression of the game’s story...Indeed, the use of more elaborate, interactive cut scenes is one example of this structure, where the player might be offered a choice before, after, or during a cut scene to determine what happens next. Branching structures thus represent a significant contribution to interactive storytelling by enhancing players’ opportunity to influence the pace of in-game events and offering the ability to alter the order in which certain events may be triggered.63

In order to keep the game’s story ambiguous enough to allow for multiple interpretations and personal narrative manipulation, however, this nonlinear approach must be flexible enough to allow for divergent playstyles to have vastly different effects on the ultimate outcome of the game, ensuring that each player is in control of their own unique narrative experience. This branching approach, fueled as it is by player agency, further allows players to determine whether their version of Silent Hill Downpour protagonist Murphy Pendleton will be a heroic or villainous character, while keeping the story ambiguous enough to still provide a compelling and unique narrative experience despite the direct influence the player has in shaping the course of the narrative.

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63 Ip, Pg. 109
The third and final factor needed to give players authorial agency is the acquisition of optional narrative content through the exploration of free-form virtual space. Janet Murray has written about the effective use of virtual space in other popular video games, including the \textit{Legend of Zelda} series: “Navigating to a place itself can be a rich experience if it is framed as an exploration and rewarded with surprising discoveries...Each of these innovative games was successful in large part because of its linking of gameplay to the exploration of a detailed and extensive landscape.”\textsuperscript{64} In \textit{Downpour}, this exploration of virtual space rewards the player with narrative clues in the form of notes and side quests that are unnecessary to complete the game but, as noted by games scholar Ewan Kirkland in his analysis of storytelling techniques in survival horror video games, provide the player with important pieces of narrative information: “A range of media texts - printed documents, photographs, computer files - aid players in [their] quest. As records of the past uncovered in real-time present, these snippets of narrative allow the unfolding of a story according to the temporal specificities of the video game medium.”\textsuperscript{65} Kirkland further notes that other narrative clues can be embedded in the virtual town of Silent Hill, encouraging and rewarding exploration and observation: “…[I]n survival horror video games spaces constitute the material signs or discourse through which the player mentally constructs the game’s story.”\textsuperscript{66} The narrative clues offered through in-game files and the exploration of the town of Silent Hill influences the player’s perception of the game’s events through both variation of the specific pieces of content collected by the player and the personal interpretations of the information given. Essentially, this placement of optional narrative content in explorable virtual space allows the player the freedom to acquire pieces of narrative

\textsuperscript{64} Murray, Janet H. \textit{Inventing the Medium}. MIT Press, 2012. Cambridge. p. 174-175
\textsuperscript{66} Kirkland, 2009. P. 70-71
information with which they can expand their own personal stories. In many cases, a player’s perception of Murphy as either a hero or a villain will hinge on a single acquired note or the completion of a specific side quest.

**Silent Hill Downpour - A Brief Summary of the Narrative Framework**

*Silent Hill Downpour* puts players in control of Murphy Pendleton, a prisoner at Ryall State Prison preparing to be transferred to Wayside Maximum Penitentiary. The game opens with a tutorial section in which players control Murphy while he attacks fellow prisoner Patrick Napier, whom Murphy identifies as his former neighbor; while Murphy attacks the man with a variety of weapons, we don’t see him kill Napier. There is a strong indication of a personal connection between Murphy and Napier: when Napier asks why Murphy is attacking him, Murphy responds, “You know exactly why.” After this scene, Murphy boards his prison transfer bus, which crashes just outside of the mysterious fog-shrouded town of Silent Hill. Murphy survives the crash and escapes on foot, pursued by Officer Anne Cunningham, one of the guards overseeing Murphy’s transfer. When Cunningham slips on a perilous ledge, the player is given their first morality choice: to either save Cunningham or to let her fall to her (presumed) death. While this choice affects the score that formulates the game’s ending, its immediate narrative impact is minimal; regardless of the player’s choice, Murphy fails to save Cunningham, and she falls into the abyss. This decision will, however, offer different dialogue between the two characters, thus rewarding the player’s choice with a corresponding display of positive or negative morality; for example, players who elect to let Cunningham fall will see Murphy announce, “I’m not going back to prison,” before walking away and thus abandoning Cunningham to her fate. Those who choose to try and save her will instead see Murphy leap to Cunningham’s aid but be unable to reach her in time.
After Cunningham’s fall (which, it is revealed later, she mysteriously survives), Murphy explores the town, searching for a way out (no small feat, since all of the roads out of town abruptly end in bottomless pits). At the Devil’s Pit caverns he encounters J.P. Sater, a former conductor of the Pit’s train-ride tour. An in-game newspaper article collected by the player reveals that Sater caused the death of eight children while operating the train drunk; after finding this article, Murphy encounters Sater, who is leaning over a safety rail, clearly intent on leaping to his death in the cavernous pits below. Here the player is given their second morality choice: they can either choose to console J.P. in an attempt to prevent his suicide, or can taunt him to provoke him into jumping. Just like the game’s first morality choice, the immediate impact of the player’s decision is largely inconsequential: regardless of the decision made, Sater elects to fall to his death, but the moral impact of this decision is immediate and profound. Players who taunt Sater (Murphy calls him a “coward”) will learn a bit more about Murphy’s morality and backstory when Sater responds to his taunts, hinting that Murphy himself is running from his own guilt.

Following Sater’s death, players guide Murphy through a series of psychologically significant locations in order to achieve the ultimate goal of leaving Silent Hill. Along the way, the player reveals clues pertaining to Murphy’s backstory, including the death of his son, Charlie, the reason for his incarceration, and the truth behind the attacks on Patrick Napier and Officer Frank Coleridge, a benevolent prison guard and father to Officer Cunningham. These clues take several forms, including pre-rendered cutscenes that signal narrative transitions (and thus must be encountered by the player as they progress), in-game documents such as newspaper articles and personal letters that can be collected by the player (but are not necessary to progress through the game’s story), and optional side-quests that reveal information about the town of
Silent Hill, its residents, and Murphy himself. All of these narrative forms combine to create an overarching narrative code that must be interpreted by the player and reconciled with the ending they ultimately achieve; that many of these narrative forms are optional allows for vastly different experiences and different interpretations based on the quantity and relevance of those experiences, in addition to potentially varied opinions concerning the narrative “weight” a certain clue or item may possess for each individual player (an interesting discussion, to be sure, but for our purposes I will be assuming each piece of information is “weighted” equally).

While the overarching narrative of the game is ambiguous, complex, and determined by the level of dedicated interaction put forth by the player, there are certain key events and storylines that are common throughout the many possible narrative threads of *Silent Hill Downpour*. While the interpretation of these narrative “facts” will differ depending on the depth of a given player’s level of exploration, their moral choices, and their earned ending, the base existence of the facts themselves remains concrete across four of the game’s five canonical endings. (One ending, the “Reversal” ending, can be considered canonical, but it also calls into question the entirety of the game’s narrative; this ending will be addressed separately.) These established narrative facts are as follows:

1. Murphy Pendleton’s young son, Charlie, is dead.
2. Murphy was incarcerated in prison and attacked a sequestered prisoner convicted of child molestation named Patrick Napier. It is unclear whether or not Murphy killed Napier, however.
3. Murphy was present for the attack on Officer Frank Coleridge, but it is unclear whether Coleridge was attacked by Murphy or by corrupt prison guard Officer Sewell.
The interpretation of these facts is dependent on a number of variables, a process that is unique to the narrative possibilities of the video game medium. Furthermore, the ways in which these facts are re-coded by the game’s ending and the acquisition of in-game clues ultimately determines the morality of Murphy as a protagonist. Did Murphy murder his son and retreat into a delusional fantasy where Patrick Napier was the culprit? Or was Napier actually responsible for Charlie’s death, an act that set Murphy on the “long, treacherous road” of revenge (to quote one in-game character) and that left the innocent Frank Coleridge an undeserving victim? Is Murphy an innocent man, manipulated by the devious Officer Sewell? As we will see, all of these interpretations of Murphy’s journey (and more) are possible depending on a number of factors, all under the direct control of the player, that influence and fundamentally alter the game’s narrative and the moral standing of its protagonist. This open-ended approach to narrative storytelling certainly isn’t unique to video games; literary scholar Gretchen Papazian points out connections between certain video game narratives and those found in long-form open-ended television shows like *Lost*:

Even in its ending this spring...[*Lost*] did not resolve the mysteries it created; instead, it left the viewer to do that work by offering a few suggestive details. In other words, it shifted the burden of constructing the story to the viewer. On the one hand, one might dismiss this as bad writing; on the other, though, it creates a pretty intriguing structure for viewer agency. It creates a narrative point of view that involves the viewer in the telling of the story. Here, *Lost* draws attention to something important about the vast narrative:
namely, as a type of narrative, its emphasis may not be on plot or story (what happens); rather, its emphasis centers on narrative point of view (who is telling the story). 67

This type of narrative, focused as it is on narrative point of view rather than detailed plots or stories, allows players to assume the role of the narrator in the stories they create by playing the game: “The player becomes the narrator because the story experience is channeled - or focalized - through the player's experience. Again, the conventional positions of narrator and narratee collapse into each other.” 68 This is especially relevant to a discussion of the Silent Hill series because, as pointed out by Bernard Perron in his analysis of the series, the franchise has commonly utilized a third-person perspective to distance players from the characters in the game, thereby allowing them to assume the role of narrator: “In the third-person perspective, you have to think in relation to the player character, considering the actions he is capable of performing...This way of visualizing is more ‘film-like’ and is naturally associated with the horror genre.” 69 The series’ use of unreliable narrators further distinguishes between players and characters by limiting the potential of player-protagonist identification, as noted by Perron in his examination of Silent Hill 2: “SH2 expands on the distinction between identification and empathy. Whereas you empathize with James, you cannot identify with him, as you are missing an important piece of information.” 70 By shifting the storytelling emphasis from these concrete narrative “facts” to the player’s interpretation and modification of those facts and by situating the player in the role of narrator, Silent Hill Downpour allows players to construct their own

68 Papazian, p. 455
70 Perron, p. 60
narrative experience, ultimately deciding the moral standing of their protagonist as both narrator and central character.

“The Secret Score” - Choosing the Ending

*Silent Hill Downpour* features six different endings, all of which are achieved through unique combinations of morality choices, certain in-game actions, and/or, in the case of the non-canonical “Surprise!” ending, optional side-quests. The use of multiple endings, while not unique to the *Silent Hill* games, has become a series trademark used to encourage multiple play-throughs and foster narrative variability, as noted by games scholar and *Silent Hill: The Terror Engine* author Bernard Perron: “Reviewers make frequent reference to the ending when critically appraising story-driven video games. Multiple endings being a feature that adds to the replay value, it is these last sequences that are most talked about, and *Silent Hill* has this attraction.”

The decisive element in determining a player’s assigned ending in *Silent Hill Downpour* is their “secret score,” a weighted sum of the totality of the player’s in-game actions combined with their morality choices. This inclusion of player agency in the ultimate outcome of the game’s narrative is an essential component in creating compelling interactive stories as described by Janet Murray: “The more freedom the interactor feels, the more powerful the sense of plot. Since plot is a function of causality, it is crucial to reinforce the sense that the interactor’s choices have led to the events of the story.” This player action-dictated “secret score” narrows down the range of possible endings to three, based on whether each player has earned a positive or negative secret score. The value of a player’s secret score is determined through three specific criteria: the morality choice made when given the opportunity to save or abandon the imperiled Officer Cunningham, the morality choice made when given the opportunity to either console or taunt the

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71 Perron, p. 100
72 Murray, 1997. p. 207
suicidal J.P. Sater, and the number of enemy creatures either disarmed (for a positive score) or killed (for a negative score).

The option to either dispatch or kill enemy creatures, while representative of a certain level of player/character hostility, is certainly more morally defensible than electing to let an innocent woman fall to her death. This combination of explicit morality (the two proffered morality choices) and somewhat ambiguous morality (whether to kill an enemy creature) allows for an interesting combination of moral actions that can lead to varied interpretations of Murphy’s morality. It is possible, for example, for Murphy to make the positive morality choices (i.e. choosing to save Cunningham and console Sater) yet still attain a negative secret score by killing a large number of creatures, thus achieving one of the game’s two “bad” endings. The inverse is also true: a player who picks the negative options in the two morality choices can still attain a positive secret score by dispatching a large number of monsters without killing them, consequently attaining one of the game’s two “good” endings. This combination of overt and ambiguous morality in determining the outcome of the game’s narrative allows for multiple interpretations of the choices and behaviors of the protagonist, as each combination of choices must be reconciled with Murphy’s moral standing as dictated, at least in part, by the player’s earned conclusion.

Each ending in either the “good” or “bad” category can be labeled according to the way the ending concludes the game’s narrative; for this purpose, we can refer to the more positive endings with a “+” symbol (as in Good+ or Bad+), while the negative endings can be marked with a “-” symbol (as in Good- or Bad-). The selection of either a positive or negative ending is dependent on the game’s third morality choice: at the conclusion of the game, the player who, as Murphy, has assumed the guise of the monstrous Bogeyman (a towering creature that has hunted
Murphy throughout his journey in Silent Hill), is given the option to either save or kill Officer Cunningham, who has revealed herself as the daughter of Officer Frank Coleridge and made clear her intention to punish Murphy for his part in her father’s attack. Choosing to spare Cunningham will result in the acquisition of the positive ending of the player’s earned category, while choosing to kill her grants the negative ending. Failing to disarm Cunningham, either by choice or unintentional failure, results in the unique “Reversal” ending which will be addressed later.

Thus, players with a positive secret score leading to the final confrontation with Cunningham are able to achieve one of the “Good” endings. If the player spares Cunningham, they earn the “Good+” ending, known as “Forgiveness.” In this ending, it is revealed that Officer Coleridge was not attacked by Murphy, but rather by corrupt prison guard Officer Sewell; Sewell also remarks that Murphy did not kill Napier, but that he (Sewell) had to “finish the job” for him. Sewell framed Murphy for both the murder of Napier and the attack on Coleridge, for which he (Murphy) is subsequently forgiven by Cunningham. Murphy and Cunningham are both transported back to the site of the prison transport bus crash, and Cunningham reports that Murphy is dead, allowing him to escape on foot.

If a player with a positive secret score elects to kill Cunningham, they earn the “Good-” ending, titled “Full Circle.” In this ending, it is revealed that Murphy attacked Coleridge (the implication being that he also killed Napier, rather than Sewell “finishing the job”). When Murphy comes to realize that he both attacked Coleridge and killed Cunningham, he picks up the latter’s gun and attempts to commit suicide. After shooting himself, however, Murphy wakes up back in the demonic Overlook Penitentiary, a cross-dimensional prison that serves as the game’s
final act, and realizes that he is trapped in a cyclical journey through Silent Hill and his own personal hell.

Players who achieve a negative secret score and opt to spare Cunningham receive the “Bad+” ending, known as “Truth and Justice.” This ending is largely identical to the “Forgiveness” ending, but it is extended to show Cunningham visiting Sewell with a gun behind her back, clearly intending to murder him in retaliation for his attack on her father. Those players who choose to kill Cunningham earn the “Bad-,” or “Execution” ending. In this ending, we find Murphy strapped to a lethal injection table, waiting to be executed. A woman, weeping in the audience, is implied to be his estranged wife (and Charlie’s mother). Officer Sewell approaches Murphy to begin the execution, and Murphy’s crimes are announced: he has been convicted of murdering his son, Charlie, in an attempt to punish his wife for leaving him and seeking sole custody of their son. Murphy is also revealed to be the murderer of Frank Coleridge, though strangely his attack on Napier goes unmentioned. Murphy’s last words to Sewell (“I’ll see you in hell, cupcake”) can either be read as the defiant act of an innocent man or the sarcastic nonchalance of an unrepentant murderer; regardless, Murphy is executed for his crimes.

Two other endings exist, and while neither one challenges the player’s understanding of the established narrative facts of the game, both are worth mentioning briefly. The “Surprise!” ending, in which Murphy tunnels out of prison and into his own surprise birthday party (attended by the iconic characters of past Silent Hill games) continues the series’ tradition of including a gag-ending to reward diligent players; this ending is unlocked only after completing a specific optional side-quest, which only becomes available to the player after they complete their first playthrough of the game. In contrast, the “Reversal” ending can be considered canonical, as it offers a definitive conclusion to the game’s narrative. Failing to disarm Cunningham during the
game’s final encounter (which thus ends with Murphy’s death at Cunningham’s hands) results in this ending, in which it is revealed, through a cut-scene that mirrors the one that opens the game, that Cunningham is not a prison guard but rather a prisoner, and that Murphy is the prison guard preparing her for transfer to another penitentiary. Exactly what this ending means is subject to a great deal of debate among the Silent Hill fan community, with two differing theories being widely accepted as distinct possibilities: either Cunningham is being punished for seeking revenge on Murphy by being forced to relive his journey through Silent Hill, or the entirety of the game’s narrative has been a delusion in the mind of the seemingly insane Cunningham. Regardless of which interpretation of the ending is the “correct” one, it either fails to explicitly offer closure on any of the game’s narrative facts or undermines their existence completely.

While these endings do wrap up the narrative of the game, they also lack any sense of closure to the player’s narrative experience, as pointed out by Bernard Perron: “...[A]s linear in their structure as the games are, the endings lack finality; they are only provisional.”73 One of the primary reasons for this lack of closure is the variety of endings present; while a single playthrough can attain a sense of narrative closure, several playthroughs can result in several different endings, thus reducing the effectiveness of any one ending at concluding the story: “If the various endings do matter, it is certainly because they allow different interpretations and give different shades and nuances to the game.”74 Essentially, no single ending can be viewed as the “right” one; that assessment lies solely with the player guiding the narrative. Closure, as noted by philosopher Noel Carroll, is an important narrative element in maintaining authorial control: “When an artist effects closure, then we feel that there is nothing remaining for her to do. There is nothing left to be done that hasn’t already been discharged. Closure yields a feeling of

73 Perron, p. 4
74 Perron, p. 55
As a result of this lack of closure, the game’s narrative never truly feels complete, and thus authorial control is wrested from the hands of the game’s developers and placed under control of the player; only the player can decide which of the game’s endings effect this sense of closure for their own narrative experience.

Furthermore, the endings of *Silent Hill Downpour* manage to avoid answering all the questions raised by the game’s narrative, while offering more questions for the player to ponder. This lack of concrete answers to the larger questions put forth by the narrative further manages to keep the game’s story from ever attaining complete authorial closure:

The narrator wraps the story up then when she has answered all the questions that have stoked the audience’s curiosity. Those questions, needless to say, do not come from nowhere. They have been planted by the author in a way that makes them practically unavoidable for the intended audience. These questions hold onto our attention as the story moves forward. Closure then transpires when all of the questions that have been saliently posed by the narrative get answered.76

Many of the endings in *Downpour* raise more questions than they answer. For example, both of the endings in which Murphy and Cunningham escape Silent Hill to return to the prison transport crash site offer a subtle but intriguing narrative detail: Murphy wears not the gray prison jumpsuit he was wearing before entering Silent Hill, but rather the orange jumpsuit he found himself wearing upon waking in the demented Overlook Penitentiary. If Murphy has been returned to his point of origin, shouldn’t he be dressed as he was when last he was there? Does this orange jumpsuit indicate, perhaps, that Murphy is actually dead, and thus stuck in Silent Hill?

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76 Carroll, p. 4
forever? Or was it merely an attempt at aesthetic continuity by the game’s developers? These questions have no concrete answer; only the player can dictate how their specific narrative attains closure.

This lack of authorial closure on the part of the game’s developers is one of the key factors that influence a player’s control over the game’s narrative possibilities. Janet Murray points out that in most narratives, there is an ultimate “true” version of the story that supercedes all other possible storylines:

A linear story, no matter how complex, moves toward a single encompassing version of a complex human event. Even those multiform stories that offer multiple retellings of the same event often resolve into a single “true” version - the viewpoint of the uninvolved eyewitness or the actual reality the protagonists wind up in after the alternate realities have collapsed. A linear story has to end in some one place: the last shot of a movie is never a split screen.  

By offering a story in which there is no true ending, and thus no narrative closure, the developers of *Downpour* have put players in control of affecting their own conclusion, thus handing them ultimate control over their own narrative experiences.

**Exploring Silent Hill: Optional Items and Side Quests**

The “secret score” and the subsequent variance in game endings is not the only way in which players are able to shape their own narrative experiences in *Silent Hill Downpour*; they can also learn background information through the acquisition of optional content in the form of collectible files or gameplay scenarios known as side quests. Unlike the morality choices and gameplay behaviors that influence the “secret score,” these optional narrative experiences have

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77 Murray, p. 136
no direct impact on the game’s assigned ending; rather, they offer ambiguous details about important key events in the lives of the game’s characters and significant psychological information from which a player can derive a clearer moral picture of Murphy as a protagonist.

The experiences of different players will vary wildly depending on two factors where this optional content is concerned. First, much of this content is located in fairly remote areas within the game world. Thus, a player must be willing to explore the town of Silent Hill in areas that aren’t necessarily directly related to the game’s core narrative. This is complicated even further, particularly in the case of side quests, by the fact that the acquisition of optional content is often dependent on a player being able to solve complex puzzles, some of which take place in several locations over the entirety of the game’s narrative. So, one player may opt to explore the town of Silent Hill as fully as possible, collecting all files and completing all side quests, while another may choose to ignore all optional content. Still others will fall somewhere in the middle of this spectrum, acquiring some content and completing some side quests; most players will have narrative experiences that vary wildly based on which files they’ve collected and/or which side quests they’ve completed. Bernard Perron points out that, despite the linearity inherent to narrative video game experiences, the Silent Hill series’ tendency to encourage and reward diligent exploration allows for the incorporation of player agency in determining the course of the game’s narrative:

Yet, if Silent Hill does not let the gamer create the path through the game world, it does let him choose how he navigates the given world. The gamer can take the attitude of a player, improvising his way as much as possible, wandering freely around town and the various indoor locations...The games allow the player to simply walk around just to
experience the graphics, forgetting for a while the goal of the search...the actions of the 
player are observed in survival horror games.\footnote{Perron, p. 6}

The second reason for varied gameplay experiences based on optional content is the ambiguity of most of the obtained narrative content; players must decide how important a piece of information is, where it fits into the puzzle that is the game’s overarching narrative, and what exactly that information is saying. This narrative ambiguity is one of the primary structural features utilized by the developers of the \textit{Silent Hill} series, and \textit{Downpour} in particular, to allow for variable narrative experiences; Bernard Perron points out that “the ambiguity about what’s happening in Silent Hill results in an opened space of understanding and interpretation.”\footnote{Perron, p. 40} This ambiguity allowing for player interpretation further distinguishes the narrative experiences of different players; what one finds to be a groundbreaking piece of background information on a particular part of the storyline, another will dismiss as unimportant or irrelevant. While the study of player interpretation is certainly worthwhile, for the purposes of this analysis I focus on the game as a text. I examine a range of interpretative possibilities for each piece of information. I assume that a player has collected \textit{all} of the optional content, and I discuss those that have the most narrative impact on the game’s story.

Collectible files in \textit{Silent Hill Downpour} take various forms, including newspaper articles, official documents such as police reports or prison memoranda, and personal notes such as letters and journal entries. Ewan Kirkland points out the variety of forms these bits of information can take and the purposes they can serve in contributing to the game’s overall narrative:

\footnote{Perron, p. 6}
\footnote{Perron, p. 40}
Written text in Silent Hill is framed through various media. Text-books, with associations of authority and knowledge, are frequently used to convey instructions. Graffiti, in contrast, serves more thematic functions – indicating James’ damnation, or Heather’s troubled past. Children’s picture books serve both purposes, indicating the games’ fantastical environment, while providing vital clues to surviving their perils. Diary entries largely serve a confessional or eye-witness storytelling function. Audio and video cassettes operate as documentary, revealing hidden, invariably sinister, truths.\textsuperscript{80}

Many of these documents, particularly those from official sources, lack any identifying details: names, dates, and specific locations are often blacked out in order to remain ambiguous, leaving the player to deduce who the file is referencing through contextual clues or personal interpretation. Some of these files are easy to locate: they are either posted on doors (such as the newspaper article that informs the player of J.P. Sater’s responsibility in the fatal Devil’s Pit tram crash) or otherwise placed in areas through which Murphy must proceed to progress through the game. Others, however, are much more difficult to find: they are either located in areas that the player does not have to explore in order to complete the game, or they are hidden in obscure hiding spots, such as one file that is hidden behind a cabinet that the player must push out of the way in order to discover. Some files serve little purpose in explaining the events of the narrative as they pertain to Murphy as a protagonist; these can include news articles about events in the town of Silent Hill or background information on how to complete some of the game’s puzzles.

Others, however, contain important background information; Ewan Kirkland has noted that, similar to non-interactive cut-scenes, the inclusion of optional diegetic narrative information

in the form of collectible items such as documents and files allows for alternative storytelling practices in video games:

While Silent Hill’s video sequences, drawing heavily on cinematic conventions and viewing practices, represent the most overt moments of storytelling, other video game-specific methods are also employed within the series requiring more direct player involvement. Pictures and photographs, fragments of newspapers, inscriptions on monuments, diary entries, graffiti, writing on collectable objects, radio transmissions, audio tape recordings, background conversations, all contribute to this second-level storytelling process.81

One collectible item, for example, takes the form of a police report, revealing that Murphy was arrested and imprisoned for stealing a police cruiser and leading law enforcement officers on a high-speed chase across state lines. While this information is revealed less explicitly in a cut-scene later in the game, the police report that documents Murphy’s illegal activity is accessible much earlier in the game, and in addition to providing a more detailed description of these events also affects the player’s perception of Murphy throughout the rest of the game’s narrative. Those who don’t find this article could conceivably form a very different image of Murphy before his reason for being imprisoned is explicitly given, thus giving them a different moral lens through which to view his actions; without collecting it, the player must go through the game without knowing why Murphy was incarcerated, and thus could develop a perception of Murphy that paints him as a more villainous figure. Murder, for example, wouldn’t be completely out of the question, given that the game opens with the player acting out a violent attack on an unarmed man.

Other files may be ambiguous but important enough to spin the narrative in new
directions depending on the interpretation of the specific player. Bernard Perron refers to one
collectible note from *Silent Hill 2*, noting the impact these optional narrative puzzle pieces can
have on a player’s understanding of the game’s larger narrative universe:

‘I saw those demons. They were there, I’m certain. But my friend says he didn’t see
anything. If that’s true, does that mean that what I saw was an illusion? But whether that
demon that hates human beings was real, or whether it was just some kind of
hallucination that my mind dreamed up...one thing, I know for sure is that I’m beyond all
hope.’ While this memo talks about perception and hallucination, it nevertheless states a
terrifying reality independent of James, therefore presenting his point of view as impartial
and objective... 

Collectible notes and files play a similar role in the more recent *Silent Hill Downpour*. For
example, near the end of the game Murphy finds a letter from his estranged wife that is
apparently a reply to a letter written by Murphy from prison. In this note, Murphy’s wife rejects
his appeal for forgiveness and condemns him for failing to be a good father to Charlie. While this
note may only indicate that Murphy’s wife holds him responsible for Charlie’s death as a result
of his neglect, the vitriolic tone and angry condemnation of Murphy as a human being could also
indicate that Murphy is actually personally responsible for Charlie’s murder; the note is
ambiguous enough to allow for multiple interpretations, allowing the player to fit this particular
narrative puzzle piece into the overarching story as they see fit, based on their actions and
personal perception of Murphy as a protagonist up to this point. This particular note must then be
reconciled with the player’s earned ending; does a positive ending that paints Murphy as an

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82 Perron, p. 60
innocent victim imply that the note was merely a grief-stricken mother’s indictment of Murphy’s negligence, or does it hint at a deep-seeded guilt that still resides inside Murphy, despite his unwillingness to kill either Napier or Coleridge? Does a negative ending, particularly the “Execution” ending, serve as proof that Murphy’s wife was, in fact, condemning him for the murder of their son? The ways in which these optional files fit into the overarching narrative allow the player further opportunities to author their own story based on their level of interaction and personal interpretation of the game’s clues and events, allowing them to justify their perception of Murphy as either a remorseful hero or a psychologically unhinged villain.

Collectible notes and files aren’t the only pieces of optional content that a player can encounter in *Silent Hill Downpour*; players who explore the town of Silent Hill will inevitably come across a series of optional side quests that can be completed for additional narrative clues or gameplay bonuses. These side quests often take place in isolated areas and task the player with solving a mystery related to a former resident of the town, such as one side quest in which Murphy must return a number of stolen goods to their rightful owners’ residences. This type of side quest has no immediate impact on the game’s narrative, but it does allow the player to construct a psychological profile of Murphy. After all, why would Murphy bother trying to return stolen goods to their owners if he wasn’t fueled by some measure of empathy? Even those side quests with no clear narrative impact allow the player to reconcile Murphy’s actions (and, by extension, his or her own) with the moral image they have formed of the game’s protagonist. Other side quests, such as “Shadow Play” and “Art Collector,” which require Murphy to acquire and interact with occult-themed objects throughout the town, imply that there is perhaps something even more sinister at work in the town of Silent Hill; in this particular instance, players can pull narrative clues from previous games in the series, which have dealt more
directly with the concepts of the occult and religious themes, to form their own ideas concerning the impact of these paranormal influences on Murphy’s journey. It is up to each player to determine how much this occult-influenced narrative thread will influence their own journey in *Downpour*.

Some side quests, however, *do* have immediate narrative impact on Murphy’s overarching journey. The “Cinema Verite” side quest, for example, allows the player to explore interactive films of key locations from Murphy’s past, particularly his former residence and the attic of Murphy’s former neighbor and convicted child molester Patrick Napier. By completing this side quest, players are either reliving actual moments from Murphy’s past or guiding Murphy through his own delusions; it is up to the player to decide which interpretation applies to their story. This isn’t the only side quest that reveals relevant information pertaining to Murphy’s journey; one side quest tasks players with releasing a series of caged birds located throughout the city. Each time a bird is released, a brief cut-scene plays; only when every bird has been released does the player sees the cut-scene’s conclusion: Murphy and his son, Charlie, walking hand in hand through a field on a sunny day. Whether this bit of information serves as a beloved memory in Murphy’s past, as the longings of a guilty man, or as something else entirely is dependent on the player; each person will fit this narrative puzzle piece into their own story in a different way, while others will never obtain it at all. These side quests, while constructed by the game’s developers, allow players to craft their own stories based around their level of exploration and dedication and to interpret the acquired narrative clues so that they fit with the overall narrative and moral standing of the protagonist that they have created through playing the game.
Putting it All Together - Rereading Narrative Facts

By combining the narrative deviations possible through the assignation of the “secret score,” the earned ending, and the collection of additional narrative clues through optional files and side quests, one can analyze the ways in which the narrative framework of *Silent Hill Downpour* can be dictated by the player. The three narrative facts that apply to four of the game’s six endings are drastically rearranged and re-coded depending on a variety of factors influenced by player agency. As indicated in Figure 1, the conclusion that the player earns by accumulating a “secret score” based on their morality choices and in-game actions directly influences what they perceive to be the “truth” behind these narrative facts; who attacked Coleridge, for example, is clearly dictated by the player’s earned conclusion. Furthermore, a player’s moral perception of Murphy as a protagonist, as dictated by their own actions and the narrative clues they encounter through optional game content, will also affect their understanding of the game’s “facts.” Players who neglect to complete the “Cinema Verite” side quest, for example, may be less convinced of Napier’s role in Charlie’s death, and may be more likely to believe that Murphy killed Charlie himself (though the opposite conclusion could be drawn as well). It is worth noting that all of the interpretations included in the table (except those followed by a “?”) have been explicitly shown to the player; so the “Full Circle” ending, which explicitly shows Murphy attacking Coleridge, forces a player to accept that fact as narrative “truth” (insofar as narrative truth is taken as concrete fact; in the *Silent Hill* series, even the things that are accepted as “truth” are up for debate and personal interpretation). In the “Execution” ending, on the other hand, we are not explicitly shown Murphy’s attack on Coleridge. Murphy is either guilty of the attack or has been set up by Sewell; this ending, despite its sinister overtones, allows room for either interpretation.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Earned Conclusion</th>
<th>Fact 1: Charlie is Dead</th>
<th>Fact 2: Murphy Attacks Napier</th>
<th>Fact 3: Coleridge Attack</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Forgiveness”</td>
<td>Murdered by Napier(?)</td>
<td>Napier killed by Sewell</td>
<td>Attacked by Sewell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Truth and Justice”</td>
<td>Murdered by Napier(?)</td>
<td>Napier killed by Sewell</td>
<td>Attacked by Sewell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Execution”</td>
<td>Murdered by Murphy(?)</td>
<td>Napier either killed by Murphy, OR this event never happened(?)</td>
<td>Attacked by Murphy(?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Full Circle”</td>
<td>Unclear; Allows for the murderer to be either Murphy or Napier(?)</td>
<td>Napier killed by Murphy(?)</td>
<td>Attacked by Murphy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Impact of Files/Side Quests**

- File: Letter from Murphy’s wife indicates that Murphy *may* have murdered Charlie.
- Side Quest: Several side quests reveal Murphy’s guilt over Charlie’s death.
- File: Several files allude to the murder of Napier in prison, as well as detailing his crimes for which he was imprisoned.
- Side Quest: “Cinema Verite” allows the player to explore Napier’s house and attic, where it is implied he murdered children.
- File: Several files reference Coleridge’s attack and detail his attempts to implicate Sewell in criminal misconduct.

**Figure 1** - *A brief examination of potential interpretations of key narrative events as influenced by the player’s earned conclusion and completion of optional content.*

Of course, the player choices made throughout the game that led to the earned conclusion can give the player more clues with which they can interpret the game’s events. So, for the aforementioned “Execution” ending, which is attainable by accruing a negative “secret score” and killing Cunningham in the final scene, the player’s negative morality choices would invariably lead to a depiction of Murphy as an unrepentant killer; this ending’s morbid
conclusion would thus serve to affirm this villainous depiction. Even when the moral choices align so neatly with the morality as indicated by the conclusion, however, there is room for interpretation; it wouldn’t be out of the question for a player to conclude that Murphy was merely concerned with personal survival because he knew the only potential outcome of Sewell’s devious manipulation of the facts was his own execution.

This is complicated even further by the fact that many of the endings allow for a combination of moral play styles. Players who acquire a negative “secret score,” for example, may have done so despite selecting the positive options in both morality choices; how then would a player reconcile Murphy’s execution, which seems to indicate his guilt in the murder of his own son and the attack on Officer Coleridge with the fact that Murphy attempted to rescue Cunningham and console the distraught J.P. Sater? A player who reaches the “Execution” ending in this way would have created an entirely different story than one who made the negative morality choices and thus would have a very different perception of Murphy’s morality.

In addition to the “secret score” and the game’s multiple endings, players’ narrative journeys will be further modified by their acquisition of narrative clues through optional content. As previously stated, some of these have direct impact on the events of the story, while others do not; regardless of their immediate relevance to the overall plot of the game, however, all collectible files and side quests allow the player to build a unique psychological profile of Murphy dictated by their level of dedication to this additional content and their own personal interpretations. This psychological profile essentially serves as a moral lens through which players must view Murphy’s actions in the larger narrative; does the “Ribbons” side quest, for example (in which Murphy follows a series of clues in order to learn that a spiteful mother murdered her autistic daughter), serve as just another grisly tale of the town of Silent Hill, or
does it serve as a reflection of Murphy’s own guilt in the death of his son? Each collectible note or side quest comes loaded with narrative implications that must be reconciled with the narrative not by the game’s creators, but by the individual user. This embedding of optional narrative information, the acquisition of which is dependent on the player’s level of dedication and effort, helps to distinguish the dynamic narrative structure of video games from more “static” texts such as books or film. All of this optional content, in addition to the “secret score” as dictated by player choice and action, combines to offer the player the opportunity to write their own story in which Murphy is either a heroic victim or a villain being punished for his heinous crimes.

Conclusion

Throughout Silent Hill Downpour, players are given multiple opportunities to piece together narrative elements, filtered through personal perception, into a single narrative whole. The developers have created the game world and established a narrative framework, but they’ve populated that game world with such a high degree of varied experiences and ambiguous narrative impact that they’ve ensured that the user is given the ultimate responsibility in crafting their own story and subsequently determining the morality of the protagonist, Murphy Pendleton. Tomm Hulett, the executive producer of the Silent Hill series (and co-writer and producer of Downpour) shared his own personal beliefs about the nature of authorship in the Silent Hill series on his personal blog, where he praised the concept of authorial intent but denied its application to the Silent Hill series:

The games themselves are based around the fragility of human perception – that we all see subjective versions of the world. So, naturally, the games leave a lot of things ambiguous...purposefully avoiding dot-filling so the player can do it herself. It’s why Silent Hill has such ardent fans; they’ve spent years thinking about the stories, debating,
researching, and so on...There is enough information to draw conclusions. The important thing to realize, though, is that each fan can draw these conclusions herself.\textsuperscript{83}

This “dot-filling” is where the player’s narrative authorship takes place; this is reliant on a combination of the different factors discussed above, particularly those that are unique to the medium. The use of branching narrative paths that transform based on player agency combined with the use of free-form virtual space as a “hiding place” for bonus narrative content allows for the game’s developers to fill the virtual town of Silent Hill with a staggering number of possible narrative paths; this number becomes infinite when players begin decoding and interpreting the narrative themselves in order to author their own unique story.

As we have seen, the player is the only person in ultimate control of deciding whether Murphy Pendleton is a heroic or villainous character; no matter how rigid the framework of the game may seem, there exists so much narrative variation in the world of Silent Hill that, despite that world being created by programmers and developers, authorial control ultimately lies first and foremost with the player. This emphasis on player authorship has a number of interesting ramifications, not the least of which is that players are able to encode their own thoughts, feelings, experiences, and values in their own stories and interpretations. This has allowed for extensive discussion about the stories of and meanings behind the Silent Hill series; examination of the online discussions surrounding the Silent Hill series shows players taking control of their own stories and using popular media to reflect their own lives and experiences. Tomm Hulett sums up the importance of this authorial shift in the Silent Hill series as an important tool in fostering participatory connections between media users and, as one of the minds behind the

creation of *Silent Hill Downpour*, it is fitting that he should be given the final word in this
discussion:

By all means, enjoy the Silent Hill series—whatever that means to you. There are plenty of
people out there who will be more than happy to discuss it. You could learn a lot of
interesting things about those people by listening to their thoughts on the games, like
their own personal beliefs, their views on life, or themes that resonate and matter to them.
And I think it’s pretty cool a game series could provide that kind of connection.\(^{84}\)

\(^{84}\) Hulett
CHAPTER III:

THE SYNTHESIS AND EVOLUTION OF PARTICIPATORY CULTURE, INTERPRETATION, AND CROSS-CULTURAL READING IN SILENT HILL DOWNPOUR

Now that a framework is in place for understanding the numerous narrative possibilities offered by Silent Hill Downpour, attention must be given to the ways in which the game’s many players and fans use the loose narrative framework in combination with the abundance of narrative “puzzle pieces” and personal interpretation to craft personal narratives that, as suggested by Downpour producer and co-writer Tomm Hulett, reflect each fan’s “own personal beliefs, their views on life, or themes that resonate and matter to them.” After all, the range of narrative possibilities offered by Silent Hill Downpour mean nothing if the game’s fans aren’t actively engaged in constructing meanings from the narrative scraps offered to them throughout their own personal journeys through Silent Hill. In order to explore the many uses fans have for the variable narrative experiences of Silent Hill Downpour, I incorporate media scholar Henry Jenkins’ research on participatory culture and fandom, Stanley Fish’s influential work on reader response theory and literary interpretation, and Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz’s study of culturally-specific decodings of the popular television series Dallas into an analysis of the online fan community for the Silent Hill series, with discussion focused primarily on fan reaction to and discussion of Silent Hill Downpour. Analysis of this fan community provides evidence of the importance of variable narrative structures offered by many video games in the evolution of participatory spectatorship and the erosion of the already contested distinctions drawn between media producers and media audiences.

I argue that video games can and often do operate as media texts that not only encourage participatory culture but in fact demand it in order for meaning to be constructed in response to the narrative experiences offered by the game’s developers. This incorporation of player participation in the construction of personalized narrative experiences indicates that media audiences, far from being passive consumers of cultural texts, are often willing and eager participants in the construction of textual meaning. While many cultural scholars and theorists have previously suggested this hypothesis, the variable narrative structure offered by video games like *Silent Hill Downpour* points to an evolution of this concept, one in which fans no longer have to read against the grain or within the confines of a textual framework passed down by omnipotent authors but rather can both actively and passively shape the text’s narrative in ways that reflect their own values, beliefs, and personal experiences. What video games offer, then, is a synthesis of personal interpretation and participatory spectatorship that signals a shift from media authors to media audiences as the primary creators of narrative and cultural meaning. This shift is not located merely in the willing resistance of fans, but is accounted for and incorporated into the construction of texts during the process of media production. Media producers’ acknowledgement and encouragement of audience participation in the construction of cultural meaning not only makes room for participatory spectatorship, but often requires it. An analysis of fan discussion of the narrative experiences encountered while playing *Silent Hill Downpour*, then, offers insight into both the ways in which fans engage with variable narratives and the ways in which media producers willfully and knowingly foster the participatory creation of cultural meaning.

**Fandom and Participatory Culture**
Much of the research on fandom and participatory culture can be traced back to the influential work of Henry Jenkins, whose research on fan communities surrounding popular cultural texts such as *Star Trek* indicated that “the reader’s activity is no longer seen simply as the task of recovering the author’s meanings but also as reworking borrowed materials to fit them in the context of lived experience.”\(^86\) Jenkins focused primarily on fan responses to television shows, whose episodic nature and ensemble casts provided an abundance of material with which fans could actively engage, yet whose strict notions of authorship and narrative canon maintained a rigid framework within which participatory fans were required to reside. Even so, Jenkins noted that the desire of fans to bring a given text more in line with their own personal beliefs, values, and experiences encouraged a creative reworking of the foundational elements offered by the media text: “For these fans, a favorite film or television series is not simply something that can be reread; it is something that can and must be rewritten to make it more productive of personal meanings and to sustain the intense emotional experience they enjoyed when they viewed it the first time.”\(^87\) Often, this rewriting of media texts would take the form of fan-authored stories, songs, scripts, artwork, or other creative work, and would feature fans delving into the psychological motivations of favorite characters. It is interesting to note that fans of the *Silent Hill* series offer a similarly passionate community, albeit one that focuses on discussion of personal responses to the narrative rather than using fan fiction to fill in the gaps presented by limited viewpoints or time between episodes. Games scholar Bernard Perron, speaking specifically about the *Silent Hill* fan community, noted that it is “fascinating to realize

\(^87\) Jenkins, 1992. p. 75
that others are so passionate about games...that they analyze and theorize about the plots.” In fact, as Perron further acknowledges, much of the fan response to the Silent Hill series is based not around specific stories or characters, but rather the pleasure of interpreting the narrative puzzles offered by the series’ games. “As soon as gamers recognize the complexity and depth of Silent Hill’s plots and start to reflect on them...their pleasures are rooted not as much in the stories themselves and the fate of characters who are struggling to understand both their past and what is happening to them, but in the narrative construction itself.” Fan discussions such as those described by Perron often take place on internet message boards and Silent Hill fansites, of which there are several; popular websites that encourage and foster player interaction and discussion include The Silent Hill Historical Society, Silent Hill Heaven, Silent Hill Community, and Rely on Horror. These websites feature active discussions about fan interpretations and responses to the games’ narrative structures, with Silent Hill Downpour forums specifically featuring discussion threads with titles such as “Which ending do you think ‘fit’ best?” and “Monster/Character/Location Symbolism.”

This active discussion of the series and intense interest in the structural foundations of the games clearly situates player response to the Silent Hill series within the definition of fandom offered by Henry Jenkins: “One becomes a ‘fan’ not by being a regular viewer of a particular program but by translating that viewing into some kind of cultural activity, by sharing feelings and thoughts about the program content with friends, by joining a ‘community’ of other fans who

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89 Perron, p. 41
90 “Which Ending Do You Think ‘Fit’ Best?” Silent Hill Community. Web.
Jenkins further notes the importance of the internet in building and maintaining fan communities in his discussion of an internet-based *Twin Peaks* fan-group in the early infancy of the world wide web as a medium for interpersonal communication: “The interactive nature of computer net discussion makes it possible to trace the process by which television meanings are socially produced, circulated, and revised.” The importance of internet fan communities, even during the early 1990s, was not lost on Jenkins, who acknowledged their value as a rich source for academic study, one whose importance and utility in the process of cultural analysis has only intensified over time: “Here, the computer net groups allow us to observe a self-defined and ongoing interpretive community as it conducts its normal practices of forming, evaluating, and debating interpretations. These discussions occur without direct control or intervention by the researcher, yet in a form that is legitimately open to public scrutiny and analysis.” Because of the unbiased, “found-object” nature of online message boards, as well as their importance in the creation of fan communities and the circulation of theories and interpretations, they are an ideal source of information for this particular study of *Silent Hill* fandom, one that does not require an active researcher to suggest and potentially guide conversation. Accordingly, fan discussion will be drawn exclusively from online fansites and message boards, with verbatim transcriptions of fan comments and conversations given with minimal editing to increase clarity and continuity.

Fan responses to the narrative structure of *Silent Hill Downpour* are as varied as the interpretative and structural possibilities offered by the game’s branching plot; accordingly, much fan discussion is focused on the suggestion and discussion of personal theories and

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92 Jenkins, 1992. p. 41
94 Jenkins, 2006. p. 118
interpretations regarding the significance of key iconography such as settings, items, clothing, and enemy design, as well as the overall structural and thematic importance of the game’s many possible narrative paths. As noted by Henry Jenkins, this seemingly objective analysis of the game’s narrative structure often disguises personal explorations of meaning and significance by the user offering the theories and interpretations: “When fans talk about meaningful encounters with texts, they are describing what they feel as much as what they think…Fan speculations may, on the surface, seem to be simply a deciphering of the aired material, but increasingly speculation involves fans in the production of new fantasies, broadening the field of meanings that circulate around the primary text…”95 An example of this exploration of personal meaning can be found in a discussion thread on the Silent Hill Community message board. Under the topic heading “Didn’t Get This,” forum user rollerfan222 initiates the following discussion concerning an in-game area encountered just prior to initiating the final confrontation with the game’s ultimate nemesis, dubbed my many fans as “Wheelman:”

**rollerfan222:** Why do we have to put the evidence on a scale before entering the Wheelman's room? Either side opens the door so what's the point? Is there any meaning to it?

**devil hunter:** I think it symbolizes how Murphy is being judged. The evidence is put on the scale, he's guilty and must be punished. Then you fight Wheelman. The whole final area repeats the events from the prison riot when Murphy had to kill Frank. It's like Anne wants to undo what happened there, she wants to avenge her father, so her monster, Wheelman which symbolizes Frank, is fighting his killer (who Anne thinks its the killer

95 Jenkins, 2006. p. 140
at least), but sadly, same thing happens (what Anne thinks happened at least), Frank is killed "again" by Murphy.

**emma:** those evidence proofs him that he was innocent and didn't do it ...didn't do any thing about that crime of sewell beating frank to death he was only eye witness of this murder...that's why we all see murphy ..like he felt guilt for not only helping him out ...

Forum users devil hunter and emma, replying to the same question with their own seemingly objective analysis of this particular in-game event, give radically different answers; yet, both users are able to provide evidence from the game’s narrative to support their claims. It is clear that both users had wildly different narrative experiences; devil hunter feels that Murphy’s guilt is clearly on display because the game requires the player to place evidence of his alleged crimes on a scale prior to encountering the Wheelman, while emma believes that the placement of the evidence indicates Murphy’s innocence. Each player’s interpretation is fueled by a number of factors, including the narrative context for this particular event as dictated by their earned ending, as well as any personal involvement they may have with Murphy as a protagonist. Thus, in replying to rollerfan222’s query and offering their own analysis, both fans are actually negotiating the ways in which they have constructed their own meanings as a response to this particular in-game event. Henry Jenkins noticed similar interpretive differences between fans of *Star Trek*, noting that a number of personal and cultural factors could play a part in the construction of differing fan theories: “...[T]hese two very different ways of making sense of *Star Trek*... potentially reflect different reading backgrounds, social experiences, ideological orientations, desires.”

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96 “Didn’t Get This.” *Silent Hill Community*. Web.
97 Jenkins, 1992. p. 96
Interpretation and the Displacement of the Text

Of course, varied interpretations of cultural texts aren’t solely the work of dedicated fans; many cultural and literary theorists, perhaps most notably the literary scholar Stanley Fish, believe that the primary creator of meaning in any cultural text is not the author but, rather, the reader. Fish and other like-minded reader-response theorists propose models of reception in which “the reader [is] freed from the tyranny of the text and given the central role in the production of meaning”98 resulting from “the instability of the text and the unavailability of determinate meanings…”99 Fish himself devoted much time to analyzing critical and academic reception to literary works, noting that even the established “facts” of a given reading are viewed through the lens of interpretation, which often results in disagreements over the validity of specific readings:

…[D]isagreements cannot be resolved by reference to the facts, because the facts emerge only in the context of some point of view. It follows, then, that disagreements must occur between those who hold (or are held by) different points of view, and what is at stake in a disagreement is the right to specify what the facts can hereafter be said to be.

Disagreements are not settled by the facts, but are the means by which the facts are settled. Of course, no such settling is final, and in the (almost certain) event that the dispute is opened again, the category of the facts ‘as they really are’ will be recommitted in still another shape.100

Fish’s analysis of literary reception is relevant to a discussion of the Silent Hill fan community for two primary reasons. The first is that Silent Hill’s fan base views each game in the series as

99 Fish, p. 305
100 Fish, p. 338-339
an artistic production that is meant to be taken apart and analyzed critically, similar to the ways in which Fish himself dissects the works of John Milton and other literary authors. The serious and intellectual nature of fan analysis within the Silent Hill community has been pointed out by games writers such as Daragh Sankey, who directly compares the artistic status of the games in the eyes of their fans with that of famous literary works:

“The vagueness and ambiguity unsettles the player and adds to the tension, but it also means that a great deal of possible ‘readings’ are possible within the game. While poring through long-forgotten Silent Hill fan sites, I came across some of the most outlandish interpretations of the game’s meaning. I think it’s incredible that console gamers could somehow be motivated to take flights of hermeneutical fancy normally reserved for scholars’ analyses of Finnegans Wake or Guernica.”

The second and perhaps more important quality of the Silent Hill games that makes them particularly relevant to a discussion of Fish’s interpretive analysis is that the games exemplify “the instability of the text and the unavailability of determinate meanings” that Fish points out are vitally important factors that contribute to varied textual interpretations. In fact, as my previous analysis of Silent Hill Downpour’s narrative structure has shown, the text is intentionally created to be unstable and to lack any determinate meanings; there are simply too many variables to offer any concrete “facts” upon which any one interpretation can be judged as more “correct” than the other. Thus, interpretations become the primary source of meaning, a process that Fish noticed in the critical response to literature: “One cannot appeal to the text, because the text has become an extension of the interpretive disagreement that divides them; and, in fact, the text as it is variously characterized is a consequence of the interpretation for which it

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102 Fish, p. 305
is supposedly evidence.” Thus, the “facts” as established by the text become unreliable and ultimately unavailable as clues to a determinate meaning; this is only intensified in the case of *Silent Hill Downpour* because the facts themselves are re-contextualized and re-coded based on the player’s actions and interpretations. The displacement of the text and the primacy of interpretation over narrative “facts” has been pointed out by other cultural scholars such as Marc Santos and Sarah White, who note that the game’s intentional ambiguity is key in allowing for the burden of the construction of meaning to be shifted to the player:

> The *Silent Hill* series learned from *Resident Evil* how powerful the question ‘what the hell is going on’ can be, and continually suspends this question to intensify our playing experience. Throughout the series, our expectations regarding our role as ‘sovereign judge’ are subverted by the fact that we are never sure whether the games’ diegetic worlds are manifestations of psychotic minds or the results of supernatural forces. This ambiguity becomes intra-diegetic, as the characters themselves frequently question their degree of sanity. This centers us in a role of analyst in addition to our role as judge, creating a greater than normal distance between player and character. The characters become case studies; as analysts we repeatedly attempt to process their chaotic stories into ‘linearly’ progressive narratives that coincide with our notions of order.  

Because of this suspension of linearity and narrative rationality and the subsequent obligation for players to make sense of the game’s narrative, Fish’s displacement of the text as the source of meaning and subsequent favoring of audience interpretation over textual analysis is not only

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103 Fish, p. 340  
evident in the construction of and the response to the narrative of *Silent Hill Downpour*, it is reinforced by it.

Fish’s theories concerning unstable texts and unreliable “facts” are evident in many discussions throughout the *Silent Hill* fan community, with each contributor to these discussions offering their own varied interpretations based on textual “facts.” An analysis of the significance of the game’s enemy creature designs on the *Silent Hill Forum*, for example, reveals how different users’ interpretations can be supported with factual support taken from the text:

**Axel_98:** As far as symbolism goes with the monsters there are a couple I'm not too sure about. The Doll - I'm assuming is the fragile relationship between Murphy and his wife. Murphy destroys the dolls by Breaking them, much like he broke the relationship between himself and his wife.

**The Silent Executioner:** I was actually very happy with the Dolls. I looked at them in a more literal/sexual/prisoner context. They look like blowup dolls, Murphy even comments on it in the Centennial building. Now when you compare them to the prison backstory the Shade version of the doll is more like a memory of women from when your in the slammer. You "beat it" out but it just keeps coming back, where as if you have the woman (doll) you can stop remembering the closeness of a woman and actually be with her.

**Aerith Gainsborough:** Dolls-Symbolize the broken relationship between Murphy and Carol, and their shadows show that he is blind to his guilt (since they're invisible unless in UV light).

**swedish:** Keep in mind that the monsters could be an abstract representation of Anne's past as well. The Bogeyman is a prominent monster that Murphy seems to have no part in
creating, and I believe it was entirely imagined by Anne without any conscious/unconscious reflection on part of Murphy.105

In this particular discussion, three users give three slightly different interpretations of the significance of one specific enemy, the sexualized “Doll.” Each user provides evidence for his/her interpretation, citing other characters (Murphy’s wife), settings and narrative information (Murphy’s tenure in prison) and even in-game equipment (the UV flashlight) as textual support for their claims. One user, however, offers a different hypothesis: that the game’s enemies may not be related to Murphy, but rather to Anne Cunningham, with an appeal to a textually-supported analysis of the Bogeyman creature offered as evidence. Each contributor’s return to the text for factual support of varied interpretations indicates that the text itself is unstable as a creator of meaning; after all, if the text is able to support any of the offered interpretations in one form or another, its ability to establish any kind of canonized meaning or singular narrative experience must consequently be greatly reduced. This inability to refer to the text as the arbiter of meaning reflects Stanley Fish’s notion that interpretations, not texts, dictate meanings: “Strictly speaking, getting ‘back-to-the-text’ is not a move one can perform, because the text one gets back to will be the text demanded by some other interpretation and that interpretation will be presiding over its production.”106

Thus, given the instability of the text and the transient nature of even the most basic narrative facts in the structure of Silent Hill Downpour’s story, fans become the central creators of meaning through acts of interpretation and consolidation of divergent narrative threads. As Fish puts it, “…[A]n interpreting entity, endowed with purposes and concerns, is, by virtue of its very operation, determining what counts as the facts to be

105 “Monster/Character/Location Symbolism”
106 Fish, p. 354
observed." This is intensified in the case of *Silent Hill Downpour* and other games like it because varied interpretations are exponentially magnified by varied narrative experiences; these two qualities combined together work to limit the text’s ability to dictate meaning while still providing a narrative experience in which players take on an active role.

**Culturally-Specific Decoding**

The ability of players and fans to experience and interpret narrative experiences in uniquely individual ways is important because, as pointed out by Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz in their study of cross-cultural readings of the television series *Dallas*, the very act of decoding and interpreting narrative texts can reveal much about the cultural systems in which audiences operate. This was especially evident for Liebes and Katz when viewers were asked to summarize the episode of *Dallas* that they had just viewed: “If understanding is a process of negotiation between the text and the viewer, each anchored in a different culture, then retellings ought to reveal the negotiation process at work. And if the model of negotiation is correct, attention should be paid to what viewers bring to the program, not only to how they use it or what they get from it.”

Media audiences, Liebes and Katz point out, are far from being single-minded groups likely to respond to media texts in a uniform way: “Domestic audiences are not homogenous entities. The ethnic and cultural communities that make up most societies, not to speak of the aggregates of age, education, gender, and class, are all different enough to raise the possibility that decodings and effects vary widely within any given society.” Like the viewers of *Dallas* analyzed in Liebes and Katz’s study, *Silent Hill* fans bring their own values, beliefs, personal experiences, historical backgrounds, and knowledge bases to their own *Silent Hill* experience.

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107 Fish, p. 8
109 Liebes and Katz, p. 8
based on a variety of factors including (but not limited to) age, gender, race, nationality, religious beliefs, education, and prior experience with and knowledge of the *Silent Hill* series.

Incorporating Liebes and Katz’s study of television audiences, however, necessitates that a distinction be made between the ways in which audiences are able to participate in the narrative progression of a given media text based on the text’s status as an “open” or “closed” text. What differentiates a television series like *Dallas* from a video game like *Silent Hill*, for example, is that while *Dallas* offers a closed narrative that does not respond to the viewers’ actions or decisions directly, *Silent Hill Downpour*’s narrative is built entirely around the incorporation of player input. Liebes and Katz noted that while the themes and meanings of *Dallas* were open to cultural interpretation, it was also “…wrong to conclude that the text is so open that the range of headings is infinite. In fact, these readings have the text in common.” The “closed” narrative of *Dallas*, then, while still open to varied decodings, limits the range of interpretative possibilities. This is in contrast to the open-ended, variable narrative of *Silent Hill Downpour*, which allows for a greater degree of personal and cultural decodings through a larger variation of narrative possibilities and the inclusion of player actions and decisions.\(^{110}\)

In many ways, the game’s formulation of each player’s “secret score” allows for varied play styles, personalities, and attitudes; an aggressive player who kills an excessive amount of enemies, for example, will see that aggression reflected in their (less positive) earned ending. Thus, personal and cultural biases are accommodated not just in fan’s reactions to the text, but in the construction and progression of the text itself. The participatory nature of video game spectatorship was acknowledged by Bernard Perron as a vital component in understanding the impact players have on the narrative world of *Silent Hill*: “In studying video games, it is easy to

\(^{110}\) Liebes and Katz, p. 13
recognize the difference between the positing of the spectator and the positing of the gamer. The latter is able to participate in the display of the game world, to act within the town of Silent Hill through Travis, Harry, Heather, James, Henry, or Alex.”¹¹¹ The gamer, as opposed to the spectator, is allowed to participate in the game world, thus bringing the same cultural biases to the act of active participatory spectatorship that Liebes and Katz saw in their focus groups’ retellings of specific episodes of *Dallas*. These biases are allowed to influence the direction and experience of gameplay in a variety of ways, as Perron points out: “Through all the possible actions, the gamer - to repeat the terms describing the action tendency - can initiate, maintain, or alter his relationship with the hostile town of Silent Hill. The gameplay intensifies the emotional experience.”¹¹²

The reflection of each player’s personal beliefs, values, thoughts, feelings, and experiences in both the reaction to and the creation of their narrative experience while playing *Silent Hill Downpour* is evident in many online fan discussions, particularly those that attempt to address and “rank” the many different possible narrative paths. In a discussion on the *Silent Hill Community* website titled “Which Ending Do You Think Fit Best,” several fans debated the merits of the individual endings and, in doing so, revealed both overt and more subtle expressions of their personal thoughts and experiences:

**OneFreeMan:** I kinda felt the Forgiveness ending was the best fit more to me personally.

**Yuki:** Either Forgiveness or Truth and Justice. Probably the latter, because I can't see Anne leaving Sewell alone after learning what happened.

**rollerfan222:** I got truth and justice, that's the one i think fits best.

¹¹¹ Perron, p. 97
¹¹² Perron, p. 98
**The Gentleman:** Forgiveness. Call me a sentimentalist, but with all the focus on how the cycle of revenge does no good, feels like a bit of a slap to the face when the characters (Cunningham in Truth and Justice) don't learn anything at the end of the story (though it is immensely gratifying to see Sewell take it deep).

**the_corinthian:** Am I the only one who thinks the reverse ending is the best? It was the first I got because i didn't know how to pound the ground and it was a complete mindfuck! when I learned the "special movement" (i only had to press triangle LOL) and got the other endings they weren't as good as the first one I got. well, that's just me, anyway

**asdf:** Truth and justice - seemed to fit more not only is it complete but seeing it doesn't contradict itself and seems to fit Murphy Full circle-it was whatever ,I didn't like this ending.I didn't see it would fit at all,felt twilight zonish The bad ending has contraction: - Murphy accused of killing his son but Napier did that(so how they linked Murphy I don't know) -he was charged for the death of Frank but Frank didn't die (right away I mean) - no so much story but character (Murphy) so the story plays him out, like a good person even if you choose him to be a asshole he still somewhat good, this ending is lead to believe that he was a psychopath all along and everything we thought about Murphy was a lie

**gothlolilunatic:** Personally I think the ending where Anne forgives Murphy but doesn't go after the real killer (I forget his name, the warden guy who was a douche bag). I think Anne getting revenge kind of ruins the theme of how revenge is a destructive cycle, and it doesn't actually make things any better in the end. Though I did like the loop ending. It
raises a lot of good questions about Silent Hill, and could probably go a long way to explaining some things about the place.

**sameday:** so exactly what did he do to redeem himself, he got himself in prison for revenge, he killed Napier, then he accepted that revenge isn't right, but in two endings he just a killer or a psycho, in two other endings he didn't do anything but not kill Frank again that not redemption. that just acceptance and innocents.

**gothlolilunatic:** Napier was a child-molester/child-murderer. Do you really need to redeem yourself for attacking someone who killed your son and single-handedly ruined your life? In most of the endings, he does kill him, but in all the endings he does attack him. Can you honestly blame him for wanting to attack the man who stole his child from him?  

This particular conversation, despite initially being focused on which ending is best supported by the text, quickly turns to personal interpretation and, consequently, the sharing and discussion of personal beliefs and values. Many fans such as “rollerfan222” and “the_corinthian,” felt that the ending they first achieved when playing the game was the best fit. Given that *Silent Hill Downpour* allows for a player’s actions, beliefs, and values to impact the direction of the game’s narrative, their preference for their first (and thus most “pure”) earned conclusion is itself a reflection of their personalities and experiences. Other fans weigh the possible endings against each other, filtering textual support through lenses of interpretation and value-based judgment to support their decisions. User “OneFreeMan” admits that one particular ending was the best fit for him “personally,” while other users reveal personal biases more subtly: user “asdf,” for example, claims that the positive endings are a better fit than any of the negative options, even going so far  

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113 “Which Ending Do You Think ‘Fit’ Best?” p. 1-2
as to suggest that the “worst” ending contradicts the text itself and thus cannot be considered a possibility (a claim that is immediately countered and dismissed by another fan). This particular fan, by placing the game’s more positive conclusions above the negative ones in terms of quality and textual support, reveals his or her empathetic feelings for the character of Murphy Pendleton, clearly believing him to be a troubled but morally just man. User “gothlolilunatic” reveals a preference for the themes offered by a particular ending, revealing his or her thoughts and feelings on the game’s narrative meditation on the themes of revenge, forgiveness, and justice. When user “sameday” condemns Murphy as a murderer and a psychotic, “gothlolilunatic” comes to Murphy’s defense, arguing that his assault and possible murder of the child molester Napier was a just attack that didn’t require any redemption on Murphy’s part. This exchange reveals much about each user’s thoughts on justice and morality, with those thoughts influencing their interpretation and construction of the narrative of *Silent Hill Downpour*. Liebes and Katz point out that often, disagreements over media texts reveal differing thoughts and opinions on the themes and subject matter found within the text: “Often, such debates on matters of interpretation spill over into discussion of the principles underlying the debate, that is, into discussion of the personal and communal experience from which the interpretation is drawn.”

By engaging in discussions about the narrative of *Silent Hill Downpour*, then, fans are also, directly and indirectly, discussing their own beliefs, values, and experiences.

**The Evolution of Participatory Narratives and Culturally-Specific Interpretation**

While much can be learned about the participatory nature of video game fandom through the application of Jenkins, Fish, and Liebes and Katz’s research, it is also important to note that the *Silent Hill* fan community and the games themselves represent not just an extension of the

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114 Liebes and Katz, p. 85
interpretive practices of media audiences and fans, but an intensification and evolution of it. Henry Jenkins’ work on fandom and participatory culture, for example, stresses that while fans can and do actively engage with cultural texts, they are still unable to personally dictate the creative decisions made by the authors of their favorite television shows and films. Jenkins addresses this issue while detailing many *Star Trek* fans’ negative reaction to the perceived mistreatment of a particular female character in the *Star Trek* film series: “Such a situation is a forceful reminder of the fans’ powerlessness over the narrative’s development, of the degree to which the fans’ own pleasures are often at the mercy of producers who operate from a very different agenda. Fans have little say about what happens to their characters or their programs…”\(^{(115)}\) The barriers placed on participatory fans by an omnipotent text forces fans to explore spaces *between* the text, filling in gaps of narrative information in an attempt to reconcile the text with their own beliefs and values: “…[A]ll fan writing necessarily involved an appropriation of series characters and a reworking of program concepts as the text is forced to respond to the fan’s own social agenda and interpretive strategies.”\(^{(116)}\) Jenkins notes, however, that this appropriation of a text’s content is still subservient to the text itself as the arbiter of meaning and creative content:

If these fans have rewritten *Star Trek* in their own terms, however, many of them are reluctant to break all ties to the primary text that sparked their creative activity and, hence, feel the necessity to legitimate their activity through appeals to textual fidelity. The fans are uncertain how far they can push against the limitations of the original

\(^{(115)}\) Jenkins, 1992. p. 118
\(^{(116)}\) Jenkins, 2006. p. 58
material without violating and finally destroying a relationship that has given them great pleasure.¹¹⁷

What *Silent Hill Downpour* offers, then, is freedom from the creative and interpretive shackles placed on participatory fans by the texts they seek to engage with. Because the text itself responds to the actions and choices (and thereby the values and beliefs) of the audience engaging with it, fans no longer need to find narrative gaps and blank margins in which they can write their own stories: the text itself is a kind of narrative sandbox within which they can construct their own stories from the narrative building blocks offered by the text itself. Any adherence to textual fidelity is, in fact, an adherence to an individualized and highly personalized experience that is dictated more by the player than the text’s producers. If Jenkins’ fans created against and alongside the text, *Silent Hill Downpour* players are able to create *within* the text; *Silent Hill* fans don’t need to write fan scripts to reflect their own beliefs and values because they can see them reflected in their experiences with the text itself.

The narrative structure of *Silent Hill Downpour* and the active involvement of players in the construction of textual meaning further reflects an evolution of the ideas put forth by Liebes and Katz in their study of *Dallas*. In categorizing audience responses to specific episodes of the series, Liebes and Katz found it helpful to break viewer synopses into three categories, all of which offered different focuses, modes of decoding, and various levels of textual openness:

“…[T]hree types of retelling seemed to emerge, each with its own idiosyncratic form and content. We call them linear, segmented, and thematic, where the linear form focuses on a sequential story line, the segmented on the characters, and the thematic focuses on messages,

¹¹⁷ Jenkins, 2006. p. 59
virtually ignoring events and characters.” While these three categories are appropriate for analyzing the closed text of a television show, only one of them, the segmented method of retelling, can be applied to an analysis of fan responses to the narrative of *Silent Hill Downpour*. The linear retelling, focused as it is on a summary of plot points and a closed and predictable text, cannot apply because, as we have seen, the narrative of *Downpour* is far too open to variation and interpretation to be summarized in any cohesive way; every player’s summary will offer not a synopsis of the game’s narrative, but rather of their own personal narrative experience. Similarly, the thematic form of retelling, based largely on ideology and an appeal to media authorship, must be dismissed: authorship is minimized in video game production in general and in the *Silent Hill* games more specifically, and as such any overriding ideology is difficult to identify. In fact, as above fan discussions have shown, any ideological interpretations placed on the text arise not from authors but from audiences.

This leaves only the open and unpredictable method of textual retelling, the segmented method, as applicable to an analysis of *Silent Hill* fan discussion. This particular type of retelling focuses on characters and their psychological motivations as a way of understanding the text; it is telling, then, that so much *Silent Hill* fan discussion is based on the characters themselves and their possible thoughts, feelings, and motivations throughout their narrative journey. That segmented retelling is the only method of summarization available to *Silent Hill* players is important for two reasons. One is that it is the only method of retelling identified by Liebes and Katz as leading to an open and unpredictable text. The variant narrative of *Silent

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118 Liebes and Katz, p. 69
119 Liebes and Katz, p. 77
120 Liebes and Katz, p. 77
121 Liebes and Katz, p. 77
122 Liebes and Katz, p. 77
*Hill Downpour* necessitates this kind of unpredictability, and leaving players with only the textually open method of retelling is important in fostering active participation in the construction of narrative experiences. The second reason that segmented retelling is important is that the *Silent Hill* games conflate the experience of the player with the experience of the protagonist; thus, when players are summarizing the game’s narrative by focusing on the characters and their psychological motivations, they are actually evaluating *themselves*. This effectively makes it impossible for fans to approach the text as unbiased observers; personal values, beliefs, and experiences are inherently present in the creation and summation of *Silent Hill Downpour*’s narrative experience.

*Silent Hill Downpour* further intensifies many of Stanley Fish’s suggestions regarding the instability of texts and the unavailability of determinate meanings in textual production. For Fish, texts and the process of interpretation are in most respects one and the same, with the text always being viewed through one or another interpretive lens:

> The rhetoric of critical argument… depends upon a distinction between interpretations on the one hand and the textual and contextual facts that will either support or disconfirm them on the other; but…text, context, and interpretation all emerge together, as a consequence of a gesture (the declaration of belief) that is irreducibly interpretive. It follows, then, that when one interpretation wins out over another, it is not because the first has been shown to be in accordance with the facts but because it is from the perspective of its assumptions that the facts are now being specified.\(^\mbox{123}\)

While Fish groups texts and interpretations together in the process of reception, *Silent Hill Downpour* offers a situation in which user interpretation is conflated with the text not just in the

\(^{123}\) Fish, p. 340
mode of reception, but in the very act of textual production. While *Silent Hill* fans are not active in the development of the game prior to its release, their own narrative experiences are undetermined until they begin acting upon the game through choices, in-game actions, and interpretive deductions. The facts of a text, thus, are specified by the player *as the story is written*, rather than being recast through whichever interpretive lens has been given precedence. Fish’s thoughts on interpretation are, in the case of *Silent Hill Downpour*, folded into the text itself.

What this evolution and intensification of pre-existing work on fandom, interpretation, and culturally-specific decoding hints at, then, is a culture that is so eager to become active participants in the construction of cultural meaning that textual producers themselves have begun to account for, allow, and even *require* active audience participation in the construction of narrative experiences and interpretive meanings. Henry Jenkins predicted that participatory culture was likely to kick start a desire on the part of audiences for a more active role in the consumption of media texts: “To be marketable the new cultural works will have to provoke and reward collective meaning production through elaborate back stories, unresolved enigmas, excess information, and extratextual expansions of the program universe.”

As this analysis has shown, *Silent Hill Downpour* offers all of the qualities that Jenkins felt were likely to be necessary for the success of media texts in the wake of active fandom and participatory culture. What *Silent Hill Downpour* signals, then, is an evolution of the role of audiences in the construction of cultural meaning, and an increased awareness on the part of media producers that active audiences need to be posited not as oppositional to the text, but as essential components in the *construction* of the text. Jenkins noted that writers of fan-fiction indicated a need for media

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124 Jenkins, 2006. p. 145
audiences “to redefine the politics of reading, to view textual property not as the exclusive
domain of textual producers but as open to repossession by textual consumers.” In many ways
the narrative structure of Silent Hill Downpour and similar video games have allowed space for
audience interaction and creative agency in the development of their own narrative experience,
implementing the need of fans to retain possession of their own media experiences by
constructing a narrative that doesn’t just allow for fan participation but requires it. Silent Hill
fans are constructing narrative experiences that reflect their own beliefs and values and then
engaging with other fans via online communities in an attempt not just to understand the
narrative structure of the game, but to understand and connect with the beliefs, values, thoughts,
feelings, and personal experiences of themselves and others. In constructing the meanings of
their own experiences with Silent Hill Downpour, the game’s players are thus able to engage
with the text, the fan community, and even themselves on a level that far exceeds that seen in
traditional modes of media reception. Creation, reception, and discussion have been conflated as
essential components in a single act, removing the barriers that heretofore existed between media
producers and fans, leading to a greater degree of communication and understanding of the
cultural contexts in which all of the involved parties operate.

\[125\] Jenkins, 2006. p. 60
CONCLUSION

This thesis addresses a number of issues pertaining to the study of narrative structure in video games. The first question raised was: what are the dominant methodologies currently used in studying video games, and are they still useful in the wake of a rapidly evolving medium? Narratologists seek to understand games as narratives and thereby apply traditional methodologies found in film and literary studies. Ludologists, on the other hand, discount the idea of games as narratives, instead believing them to be not representational but simulational. Because of this, ludologists focus on viewing games as an extension of play, with most of their attention turned to a game’s rule sets and play mechanics. Both sides have excellent ideas to offer a prospective game theorist, but neither one has acknowledged the fact that the large variety of game experiences available necessitates more flexible methodological approaches than those currently offered by either side. I suggest viewing the variety of offered game experiences as a continuum, one which allows for strictly narratological or ludological approaches to critical game studies, but also leaves space for an analytical lens that synthesizes both schools of thought into a view that recognizes the ability of games to create compelling narrative experiences around user participation and interactive gameplay.

This continuum-based methodological model allowed room for my analysis of the narrative structure of Silent Hill Downpour, a video game that incorporates both narratological and ludological elements and thus falls somewhere in the middle of the spectrum of game experiences. By tracing the branching narrative paths of Downpour’s complex story, I pointed out the many different kinds of narratives that the game was capable of producing. I also stressed the importance of the player in the construction of the game’s narrative, pointing specifically to three key aspects of the game’s ludologically-based narrative framework. These three important
qualities are: (1) The collection of optional narrative content through the exploration of virtual
space and the completion of non-mandatory sidequests, (2) The construction of divergent
narrative paths as a result of player agency, such as morality choices and a more subtle
incorporation of player actions, and (3) The inclusion of a stable but fluid narrative framework
within which players can construct their own stories. Further differentiating between the many
possible variable narrative experiences was the importance of user interpretation, which added
another layer of variability to an already highly variable narrative structure. I posited that, within
the world of *Silent Hill Downpour*, players become the authors of their own narrative
experiences, working within the provided story framework to plot events and construct
personalized meanings.

This hypothesis was then supported with an analysis of the *Silent Hill* fan community and
the extensive debates and conversations fans have taken part in on internet fan sites and message
boards. I sought to place my study of *Silent Hill* fans firmly within the realm of fandom and
participatory culture as described by Henry Jenkins, suggesting that the after-the-fact discussion
of each player’s narrative experiences and interpretations offered an evolution of Jenkins’ work
on participatory culture, particularly fan-fiction writers of popular television series’ like *Star
Trek*. I also incorporated Stanley Fish’s influential thoughts on reader-response theory and
interpretive communities into this fan-based discussion, pointing out that the fluidity of the
source text provided a similar evolution of Fish’s concepts on readers and their interpretations
constructing cultural meanings as a response to - but not solely from - the source text itself.
Lastly, I considered Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz’s research on culturally-specific decodings of
the television series *Dallas*, using the framework that they established to understand the different
types of responses viewers had to that particular media text in an attempt to understand how fan
responses to *Silent Hill Downpour* compared to those of more “traditional” media. This made it clear that, due to the potentially variable nature of video game narrative experiences, texts were displaced as the creator of cultural meaning in favor of participatory users. Put simply, each fan was able to construct a narrative experience through interactive gameplay that reflected his/her own personality, beliefs, and values. This then enabled fans to engage in conversations with each other over the game’s narrative structure in online fan groups, simultaneously discussing the game’s story and their own beliefs and value systems in the context of the narrative framework offered by the developers of *Silent Hill*. I suggested that this increased narrative flexibility and user agency pointed to a culture that didn’t just recognize participatory viewership, but outright demanded it, and that, by constructing a narrative experience which allowed users room to construct their own stories that best reflected their own beliefs and values, media producers were similarly recognizing and even encouraging users to take on the role of participatory authorship.
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