SCOTT PILGRIM’S GAMING REALITY: AN INTRODUCTION TO GAMER REALISM

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SCOTT PILGRIM’S GAMING REALITY: AN INTRODUCTION TO GAMER REALISM

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ABSTRACT

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With the rise of the gaming culture comes a similar increase in literature which addresses this lifestyle and those who live it. Without identification, this genre has gone without notice and relatively little scholarly discussion, largely due to a lack of familiarity with the subject due to prevalent misleading stereotypes. This thesis names that burgeoning genre: gamer realism. The first part of this thesis identifies its characteristics and general goals, along with some small examples of texts which exhibit some aspects of those characteristics. The second part examines the Scott Pilgrim graphic novel series by Bryan Lee O'Malley as a case study, in order to demonstrate how it exemplifies this new genre.
To my parents, family, and friends for all their support.
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CHAPTER 1:
GAMER REALISM

Introduction

The *Scott Pilgrim* graphic novels by Bryan Lee O’Malley exemplify a new genre: gamer realism. This is a subgenre of magic realism which focuses primarily on gamer culture and the effect that it has on its members. This can take many forms, but the conclusion should grapple with how the gamer-protagonist deals with the engrossing nature of his hobby and the transformation that follows. In the *Scott Pilgrim* graphic novels, Scott’s obsession with gaming and its culture have left him emotionally and socially stunted. As he meets Ramona, he aspires to be with her romantically, yet his indolent nature holds him back. Not only must he fight for Ramona by defeating her seven evil exes—a metaphor for dealing with the baggage in any new relationship—but he must also develop beyond his self-centered way of life in order to be ready for that relationship’s arrival. Because he has allowed himself to become so submerged in that gaming lifestyle, all other things of importance—responsibilities, family, even truly close friends—have fallen by the wayside. His entire world has literally become a fantasy, which he must learn to keep at bay in order to truly move on with Ramona and his life. The *Scott Pilgrim* graphic novel series can act as a case study for this new and unexplored subgenre.

In typical role-playing games (RPGs)—whether table-top, video, or live-action role-playing (LARPing) games, hereafter simply referred to under the broad umbrella
“games”—a gamer creates a fantasy world that, in some ways, defies the exterior reality of his or her life. Gamer realism departs from the interior—the imaginary or fantasy world—exteriorizing that fantasy and incorporating it into “the real world.” The rules of the game, whether created by the player-protagonist or imposed by the game itself, supplant reality. This can encompass appearances, the physics of the world, and even real-world consequences. Scott does not merely treat his world as though it is a game, adhering to its rules rather than the normal rules (natural or man-made laws) of the real world; the world responds, manifesting the fantasy seamlessly into reality.

_Gamer Realism, A Subgenre_

Magical realism, an artistic term appropriated by authors and literary critics to discuss the growing trend of fantastical elements becoming infused into otherwise decidedly realist texts. Latin American authors seem to be at the forefront of this movement, yet others have made their forays into the genre as well. Wendy Faris and Lois Parkinson Zamora, in their critical anthology on magical realism, _Magical Realism: Theory, History, and Community_, establish characteristics of magical realist texts, many of which align with postmodern traits. In her article “Scheherazade’s Children,” Faris identifies five primary characteristics, though others exist:

1. The text contains an ‘irreducible element’ of magic, something we cannot explain according to the laws of the universe as we know them…magical things ‘really’ do happen…

2. Descriptions detail a strong presence of the phenomenal world—this is the realism in magical realism, distinguishing it from much fantasy and allegory…by extensive use of detail.

3. The reader may hesitate…between two contradictory
understandings of events...between the uncanny...and the marvelous. (4)

We experience the closeness or near-merging of two realms. (5) These fictions question received ideas about time, space, and identity. (Faris 167-173)

In addition to these characteristics, Faris discusses some “secondary or accessory specifications” of magical realism: Metafiction, “verbal magic...when a metaphor is made real,” “wonders are recounted largely without comment, in a matter-of-fact way,” mirrors or analogues, metamorphosis, and the incorporation of fairy tales and myths (Faris 175-182). Ross Murfin and Supryia M. Ray add the presence of “dreamlike sequences [and] abrupt chronological shifts” in addition to Faris’ definition (242). The supernatural is no longer shocking or out of the ordinary, but it becomes run-of-the-mill.

Much like its parent genre, magic realism, gamer realism seeks to interweave reality with the fantasy world. In many ways, gamer realism can be defined along the same lines as magic realism, but with more specificity. Where magic realism can bring in all elements of fantasy, gamer realism—as its name implies—relies more specifically on gaming: RPGs, LARPing, and video games in order to tell its story. It follows the tropes of those games, assimilates their dialect, and their rules; it also acts as a metanarrative of the gaming culture, utilizing its elements to critique it alongside the story’s narrative. This essay will begin to outline the characteristics of this new subgenre, followed by a detailed explication of the graphic novels as a case study of gamer realism.

Realistic, Fantastic, and Esoteric Elements Fused

Moving beyond the primary characteristics of magical realism, gamer realism does not simply blend fantasy and reality. It does not draw solely on fantasy elements,
but upon the gaming culture through allusions and references which ground the story in “the real world,” yet as though the game has transcended the mere roll of a dice, click of a mouse, or tap of a controller.

If my avatar were simply a character—Tony Hawk—he would effortlessly skateboard his way through every level of the game. But since my avatar is imbued with game artificial intelligence that gives him some of Tony Hawk’s style and skill and my gamer ability to control and manage the virtual Tony Hawk, he stumbles and scrapes his virtual knee and doesn’t make his way seamlessly through the game. My actual skill at button mashing (the common gamer strategy of repeatedly hitting any and all buttons on a game controller device to progress in a game) has virtual consequences—Tony bleeds, falls, fails because of me. My meat-body has tainted his virtual-body, for together we constitute the player-character. (Murphy 225)

Video games begin to fuse the virtual and the real, particularly while a player immerses himself more intensely in a game. Alongside the increasing amount that a player spends with a game, the more the rules of that game become commonplace. Gamer realism demonstrates a further blurring of the line between reality and fantasy; the player might lose sight of the difference between the two worlds. This acts to normalize the world into terms with which the protagonist can identify and cope, rather than the seeming perplexities of “regular” life. He can approach this world and handle it once the rules adhere to the ones by which he prefers to live.
Gamer realism incorporates the entire gaming culture, which infuses itself into the text. In particular, however, the gaming aspects become embodied as real, but the esoterica is heightened and nearly hyperbolized as it inundates the reality of the text. This transcends the conventions of high fantasy, though it does not inherently exclude them—in order to include all of the gaming culture. Realistic and esoteric details enmesh, exemplifying a particular, alternative subset of fantasy: gaming, which includes all aspects of that culture, such as music, literature, and (of course) games. Furthermore, just as magic realism uses “[d]escriptions [to] detail a strong presence of the phenomenal world—this is the realism in magical realism, distinguishing it from much fantasy and allegory…by extensive use of detail” (Faris 168). The details—both commonplace and recondite—must demonstrate extensive detail to ground the story in believability so that the gamer aspect works alongside the audience’s conceit.

Due to its visual nature, and the inherent visual nature of most games, the graphic novel medium becomes the best example of gamer realism, as it combines art and text seamlessly. The graphic novel is not essential to the genre, but future examples will likely primarily stem from that source.

_A New Mythology_

Whereas magic realism incorporates mythology or fairy tales into the real world, gamer realism brings in a wholly different form of mythology. This is the primary point of divergence from magic realism. Gamer realism appropriates games and fantasy literature as its own mythology. “Texts labeled magical realist draw upon cultural systems that are no less ‘real’ than those upon which traditional literary realism draws—often non-Western cultural systems that privilege mystery over empiricism, empathy over
technology, tradition over innovation. Their primary narrative investment may be in myths, legends, rituals—that is, in collective (sometimes oral and performative, as well as written) practices that bind communities together” (Zamora and Faris 3). It has long been a tradition in literature to integrate classical mythology into a text. Dante Alighieri permeates his *Divine Comedy* with mythological allusions, adopted to serve his purposes. T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and countless other authors have followed that same path. Gamer realism builds upon those forebears, identifying and appropriating other myths into its texts. These myths have their roots in the classics, yet have themselves already shifted into different forms, with new facades but the same (or similar) themes. Games and fantasy literature are the myths of many late 20th and early 21st century young people, and gamer realism demonstrates this through unified and ubiquitous references to games and the imaginary worlds which inspire them.

Some of the best examples of mythology transcending into the modern world, moving away from the old standbys of Greek and Roman gods, are films, as well as video games and fantasy literature. Many of these find their basis in traditional mythology in the first place, such as George Lucas’ *Star Wars* trilogy—acknowledged by Campbell as legitimately following in mythological footsteps. However, just as he concedes that something with 20th Century origins can have mythological significance, Campbell disregards today’s culture as “demythologized,” without the appreciation for—let alone the ability to create—mythology (Campbell & Moyer 9). Furthermore, in new mediums of storytelling he sees, “the possibility of new metaphors [for old universal truths], but I don’t see that they have become mythological yet” (Campbell & Moyer 18). However, he does concede that, “when a person becomes a model for other people’s lives, he has
moved into the sphere of being mythologized” (Campbell & Moyer 15). Therefore, the same could be applied to literature and film. When a text such as *Star Wars* becomes so influential, entering into everyday discourse through oblique or direct references, it has entered into cultural mythology. Such pervasive cultural components such as fantasy texts—be they films, books, or games—consciously appropriate and employ elements of mythology repackaging those elements to create new forms of storytelling with the same tried and true themes. While classical mythology remains significant, its direct cultural relevance has waned—few texts candidly reference Greek and Roman myths, yet they have been replaced by newer texts still comprised of the same tropes. Rather than a pessimistically demythologized world, this is a re-mythologized one, and gamer realism seeks to employ these new aspects of mythology to tell stories grounded in the classical tropes of heroism or the quest.

*Expressing the Game and Gamer Culture*

Within a game, the player constructs him or herself as an entirely separate character called an avatar. This character may take the form of a hulking warrior, a slender elf, or a voluptuous witch—anything becomes possible. These characters become expressions of the player within the game, imbued with new fantastical attributes yet performed by someone without those traits.

Players inevitably begin role-playing by creating characters who emphasize some aspect of their own personality or physicality into heroic proportions in an overt display of wish-fulfillment; this melding of player and character identities allows the player’s perception of self to be reflected in his character, and provides the player with a means to gratify
erotic desire and the thirst for power, just as do dreams in a Freudian framework. (Nephew 136)

This transcends typical literary texts, where the most that a reader might do is identify with a character, fantasize about being that character or interacting with that character, living inside a world different from reality. Players find this secondary, fantasy world more enticing, as “the RPG scenario also places the players in positions of power that may differ drastically from the reality of their everyday lives” (Nephew 126). RPGs allow the player to create a character and inhabit it, supplanting a mundane life with an exhilarating one, meaningless tasks with deeds that might impact life or death.

These creations might not remain entirely in the fantasy world; their effects might shine through, bleeding into the lives of the players to a small degree. Players often treat this as a template for reality, for the way they ought to live their lives.

…role players see role-playing in a number of ways: as a testing of personal ideals; as morally challenging, involving issues of teamwork and conflict resolution (or not); as mentally or physically demanding; as opportunities to act out characteristics or beliefs they might not usually express; as granting a sense of agency that encourages feelings of influence, control, and power; as engrossing; and finally, as escapist. To some people, role play increases the equality of the game. Creating a character who shares commonalities with the overall game narrative gives the world meaning for the player. (MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler 227)

People engage in gaming for myriad reasons, from a cathartic need to see action that would not normally be a part of everyday life, to the development of skills which could
become applicable in the real world. This sort of crossover sets the precedence for what gamer realism depicts: a blending of reality and fantasy, where one influences the other in order to affect a desired outcome, whether conscious or not.

For example, Kevin Schut’s chapter in the book *Gaming As Culture* entitled “Digital Conquistadors: Negotiating American Manhood in the Digital Fantasy Role-Playing Game,” he discusses the way in which RPGs interact with gamers about ideal and acceptable masculinity through their rhetoric. “…FRPGs [Fantasy RPGs], due to their unique combination of computer technology, gaming culture and the Fantasy genre, are particularly effective texts for men to use in negotiating the often-contradictory ideals of respectable manliness, rugged masculinity and eternal boyhood” (Schut 100-101). For male players, these texts display, in clearly positive or negative lights, masculinity and the responsibility which comes with it, defying the eternal boyhood which the players live out by spending all their time engaged in gameplay. Players might play as heroes, following a path of good deeds easily delineated for them, or those paths become murkier, the choices less clear but the virtual consequences dire. At the same time, those catastrophic choices are quickly undercut by the mere fact that the game is a fantasy. The choices within the game are difficult, yet the real world consequences are just as hollow as the gold the character zealously hordes in his inventory. This is good and bad: this is good because players can test out choices, seeing consequences and internalizing them for what they might come up against—likely in a less-hyperbolic way—in the real world. It can also be detrimental if a player begins to have difficulty distinguishing between reality and fantasy. However, this is precisely where gamer realism begins to take effect,
utilizing this gray area where reality and fantasy might diverge and merging them to further the narrative.

Selective Physics and Physicality

Games contain selective physics and physicality. Often, fantasy games boast over-bulked men, excessively endowed women, or stereotypes of other kinds: elves, dwarves, demons, wily thieves, or bent hags. In traditional FRPGs or fantasy literature, “[t]he men are ‘real’ men: old and wise wizards with flowing robes, lean and athletic thieves or bards, or (best of all) ridiculously powerful, muscled warriors… [The texts] tend to be pretty heavy on displaying men with some kind of physical power, either the lean athletic kind or the brute muscular type” (Schut 112). The typical fantasy men represent some kind of ideal to which the player might one day aspire—whether in reality or simply in fantasy. Schut argues “that the presentation of body types in digital FRPGs—as in the Fantasy genre—provide fertile resources for men to play out the rough masculine ideal. Boys and men playing these games can indulge their…fantasies by playing as powerful men” (113). Gamer realism does not necessitate that its protagonist is a colossal bodybuilder, but it does demonstrate a disparity between player and character. Almost never does the character’s physique match that of the player.

The physics of gameplay do not match the physics of the real world. During battles, or even just walking along, characters may just hang in the air, jump immense distances, leap from deathly heights to land as light as a feather, or deal out and survive intense physical trauma—even gunshot wounds—all with the right combination of controller buttons or the correct roll of a dice. In the real world, these feats should be avoided due to their lethal consequences. Games allow people to enact these fantasizes
roles without the tangible consequences that accompany them. Gamer realism utilizes this fusion of reality and fantasy as the characters act out these roles to serve a purpose: a desire to bridge that disparity in some way in the real world. This might be a metaphorical inner battle played out between good and evil, or a man struggling to get past the icy exterior of the woman he loves, exploring uncharted territory in a relationship, or fighting his inner demons—the possibilities for the utilization of this metaphorical hyper-physicality are endless.

Often, emotional connections serve as more than mere inspiration. Because gamer realism addresses a melding of the virtual and the real, as well as gaming culture, and if physics and physicality are selective, damage is not necessarily taken in the same way; stamina and health might stem from different sources. Gamer culture often comes under fire for a lack of real world relationships. Many graphic novels also deal with forging connections with the real world rather than the virtual. The web series *The Guild* addresses interpersonal relationships outside of a gaming context, and the graphic novel *Level Up* by Gene Luen Yang discusses a young man attempting to break free of his gaming addiction, yet ultimately discovering that he can employ the virtual skills he has developed in a real world setting. As he makes choices which move him away from his father’s approval, things in his life begin to fail, yet as he chooses to abandon his passions, he loses a spark for life. Emotional connections become a significant aspect of gamer realism; the metaphor of solidarity in a relationship manifests itself as real, linking itself to the overall well-being of the gamer-protagonist.
Alignment—Good or Evil?

In many games, or in the types of games the gamer chooses, the gamer must determine which character he will emulate—this is called alignment, which is a moral choice by which the gamer—through his avatar—will live within the virtual world. This alignment is “a compound description that has two components: one indicating whether they are good, neutral or evil, another measuring how they feel about rules and order—lawful, neutral or chaotic” (Schut 111). A staple of RPGs and many video games is the choice between good and evil. Will the player act as a Sith Lord or a Jedi? A knight or an orc? This choice determines gameplay and, in terms of gamer realism, determines the player’s interactions with the real world.

Leaving the Virtual World to enter “The Desert of the Real”

Gamer realism tends also to explore the ironic existence of the stereotypical gamer, particularly as a starting point on his journey toward something better. Though this certainly does not apply across the board, and exceptions exist, the Peter Pan Syndrome, identified by Woody Register in his 2001 article “Everyday Peter Pans” and expounded upon by Schut, looks at “‘the eternal boy,’ who values a good sense of humor, a carefree attitude, an excitement and zest for life, and, above all, a spirit of playfulness” (Schut 103). These are the adults who, though they may not live in their proverbial mother’s basement, live a life which revolves around their games with a conspicuous lack of responsibility in the outside world, and gaming seems to be their only touchstone with adulthood.

Fantasy literature provides many themes and elements amenable to helping men wrestle with conflicting ideals of manhood. As with both
personal computers and digital games, Fantasy literature is more than just a tool for men to negotiate their gender identity, but many of its most prominent themes and elements are particularly well suited to helping men be responsible, rough and playful. (Schut 109-110)

Though these are also stereotypically males, this is not reserved for that gender. The web series *The Guild* sees an entire group of gamers led by a female protagonist named Cyd (played by Felicia Day) whose avatar is named Codex; they all suffer from this Peter Pan Syndrome. They play together on an MMORPG (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game) around which their lives revolve, until one day one of their members decides to break the anonymity barrier and meet in person (www.watchtheguild.com). Each gamer is characterized by a lack of ability to interact with the real world. They are known primarily by their avatars’ handles, and each shirks his or her real world responsibilities in whatever way possible. The series follows the characters’ attempts—sometimes half-hearted ones—to reintegrate themselves into the real world while keeping a foot in the virtual one.

Gamer realism explores this dichotomy of the real and virtual worlds and the effects that one has upon the other. The Peter Pan syndrome can most often characterize the protagonist as he struggles to find his place in the world without completely losing his passions. Playing the part of the hero is a means of attempting this: “Thus, through perseverance and proper behavior, the upright triumph over the wicked. This emphasis on the player’s role as defender of the people nicely echoes the demands of responsible manliness” (Schut 111). This notion cements the desire depicted in many games for the bulky hero who embodies ideal masculinity; these players often need someone to admire
and pattern themselves on, and living vicariously through those people becomes their way of attempting to grow up.

_The Hero and His Quest_

The archetype of the hero and his quest are key elements in gamer realism, just as they are essential to nearly every game. One of the tricks, however, comes with the fact that, in the real world there are no cheat codes to circumvent the quest. Yet, there sometimes is an oracle who gives the hero a clue or a direction in which to go. A quest is simply “a task that is explicitly assigned to the player and that involves some level of challenge. As in literature, a quest in an adventure game can be large or small, and as in literature, quests in games tend to be used to set the plot in motion” (Rettberg 170).

Joseph Campbell constructs the hero’s journey as a series of steps in which he gains more experience and understanding, allowing him to eventually win the battle and gain his goal. “A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won” (Campbell, _Faces 30_). The gamer, playing as the hero, leaves his humdrum world governed by the fetters of reality and ventures into a new world which frees him. This notion is tried and true to both gamers and students of literature, as it has existed for hundreds of years. From a practical standpoint, this seems the best way to design a game or to write a novel, for it continually propels the narrative forward: King Arthur must find the grail, so he mounts an expedition—a quest is born. Dante needs salvation, so he embarks upon his journey through Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven and, along the way, finds the meaning of life. Hamlet desires to discover the culprit behind his father’s murder, and subsequently dabbles in insanity and uncovers a rottenness pervading Denmark. Young Goodman
Brown just wants to find his wife, and his Faith in God is shaken. This does not even take into account the innumerable other literary quests: Odysseus and Telemachus, Leopold Bloom and Stephen Dedalus, Frodo Baggins and Aragorn, Luke and Anakin Skywalker—even Beowulf. These have become pillars of modern mythology with roots in the classics; people have long desired to take part in such glory-filled activities, and they can live out that dream though gaming. Mario must rescue Princess Peach, Link must collect the pieces to the Triforce of Wisdom to defeat Ganon and rescue Princess Zelda, and Pac-Man must always eat that very last dot.

The vast majority of games’ quests tie directly in with the exploration of the unknown. Often, just as much importance is placed on this foray into the uncharted country as on the ultimate conclusion of the quest. Schut calls this “The Conquistador Complex,” which drives the game forward. “A big part of all … games is charting out undiscovered territories,” because without that search can come no experiences along the way (Schut 113). Gamer realism explores this idea just as literature approaches it: the character’s outward mission, be it for a ring, the grail, the fountain of youth, or a pot of gold at the end of a rainbow, always mirrors an inner quest by the player.

In games, the player must nearly always earn achievements along the path toward attaining the Campbellian ultimate boon—the victory at end of the quest. The boon represents more than a simple monetary or physical prize, but the culmination of the entire journey. This “signifies that the hero is [now] a superior man” (Campbell, Faces 173). The end of the quest, while significant when won, can rarely be reached without first mastering all the steps along the way. Often in games, once achievements have been earned, they may take the form of items, “power-ups,” or rewards. Leveling up “is the
steady acquisition of new skills and abilities by the player’s character throughout the course of the games” (Schut 114). Sometimes these are instantaneous, adding to the player’s power, skill set, or health, while others might be saved for future use, such as a key which will unlock some future obstacle or a weapon which, when used at the proper moment, can defeat a particularly difficult enemy. “The FRPG is a vehicle for giving players the opportunity to gain and exercise power not accessible in real life…As the game continues, deeds earn experience points, which allow the player to steadily upgrade their character’s military or magical prowess” (Schut 114). Unfortunately, a player may not always be able to use an item, as he already possesses the maximum amount, or if he has neglected some sort of preparation beforehand. Finally, however, once the steps along the way have been mastered, the character can attain the reward and move on with his life. Gamer realism incorporates this into its literature through a metaphorical achievement in the real world: a life-changing decision, a choice to move forward with his real life. The player is rewarded for doing so.

**Examples of Gamer Realism**

Many texts exhibit characteristics of gamer realism, and upon closer examination might prove themselves solid examples of this genre. Ernest Cline’s novel *Ready Player One* discusses a boy who embarks upon a quest for a multi-billion dollar reward in a three-dimensional gaming environment. This environment—the OASIS—is built as a fully interactive amalgamation of all the greatest video games ever created. Within that world, the player must act according to video game rules, physics, and physicality. Cline goes further, depicting the level of gaming dedication that the protagonist Wade Watts—known more by his avatar than his real name—as well as a large portion of the rest of the
world, presents in order to track down the clues to the treasure. The gamer culture is hyperbolized, with people delving into the deepest and most obscure esoterica in their quest to find the answers to the billion-dollar question. These people adhere to the most dangerous aspects of the gamer: they literally never leave the house (though this is because of a fear of being taken out by competitors’ assassins rather than a lack of a social life), they go to school, work, and play all online, they dedicate their lives to the hunt for the prize for which research is the close examination of geek texts. Gamer sentimentality drives the world, and the thematic drive is similar: the talents learned in the virtual world will translate into the real world, and the journey toward maturity is fraught with peril. However, this comes with a touch of irony: just as Scott Pilgrim succeeds because of his virtual prowess, so does Wade. In the real world he is nothing more than an out of shape teenager; in the virtual world he represents achievements no one thought possible.

*The Matrix* trilogy by the Wachowskis also represents aspects of gamer realism. Just as Scott’s world merges reality and the virtual, the real world in *The Matrix* proves false. Mr. Anderson, the protagonist of *The Matrix*, sheds his name and takes up the alias Neo, a persona which then becomes his avatar when he returns to the virtual world with the ability to manipulate his reality. Again, the themes of searching for an escape from reality, as well as understanding and embodying an identity, pervade these films. There are even moments, just as in Scott’s world, where the abilities Neo has in the virtual world bleed into the real one. *Tron: Legacy*, as well as its predecessor, depict a blurring of reality and the virtual, as people can actually insert themselves into a game’s world. The control they exert on the games as creators or players becomes negated as the game
begins to come alive. *The Matrix* and *Tron* alike demonstrate the fear of an overly powerful computer overpowering human control, and the characters find themselves seeking to regain that control, discovering their identities along the way.

Fig. 1. Yang, Gene Luen and Thien Pham, *Level Up* (New York: First Second, 2011) 57. Print.

Finally, though films depict aspects of gamer realism well, the graphic novel—with its ability to present both text and art alongside one another in a more extended and in-depth format—remains the most effective instance of gamer realism. Alongside the *Scott Pilgrim* series stands *Level Up* by award-winning author Gene Luen Yang. This graphic novel tells the story of Dennis Ouyang, a boy whose father desperately wants him to go to medical school. Unfortunately, Dennis’ ambitions stretch no further than playing his video games. After his father’s death, four angels appear to Dennis, prompting him to follow his father’s dream for him. They help him to get back on track with his studies,
and he gives away all of his games and equipment. However, despite this, he feels unfulfilled and aimless: “You know, the best thing about video games is you never have to worry about what you’re supposed to do. In Super Mario, you rescue the princess. In Sonic the Hedgehog, you defeat Doctor Robotnik. In Zelda, you recover the Triforces. Everything’s cut and dried. The goal is always clear. Life, on the other hand… nothing’s ever clear” (Yang 55). As he aims himself toward what is supposed to be his destiny, Dennis feels as though he is losing touch with himself and his desires. He throws two arcade tokens away, some of the last remnants of his deepest desires, in hopes of leading the life his father wanted for him. When he does, he has a video game life meter, and one of his lives disappears after he makes this decision (See Fig. 1). He attempts to express himself in gaming expressions, trying to identify with the world in those terms. Furthermore, he begins to rid himself of those connections as he has been told that they will serve no purpose in his future. Parts of him begin to die, like a character in a video game losing a life.

Once again, Dennis leaves medical school to pursue his dreams after having a confrontation with the angels, who turn into Pac-Man ghosts which he then proceeds to eat (Yang 120). These ghosts represent all that has held him back—all the guilt and pain that haunted him. He thinks that, by ridding himself of these burdens, he will be able to live the life he always desired: “But then why wasn’t I happy?” (Yang 141). He realizes that simply living a carefree life will not fulfill him. As a gamer, “In an average game of G.H.O.S.T. Squad, I save hundreds of lives…The only problem is—none of those lives are real” (Yang 149). He realizes the hollowness of the way that he leads his life and decides that he needs to do something more substantial with his life.
Finally, Dennis discovers a way to ensure that his prodigious gaming skills can combine with his real world medical knowledge: through using new technology that uses similar skill sets as a gamer would possess. He can combine his two passions. This text fits squarely within the gamer realism genre, as it bridges the gap between reality and the virtual, with a gamer dealing with his nature and attempting to integrate himself into the real world, maturing past the phase of eternally entertaining himself and toward a practical life which will yield good results.
CHAPTER 2:

SCOTT PILGRIM, A CASE STUDY

Introduction

Now that the genre of gamer realism has been delineated in general terms, it seems prudent to move forward with an explication of a text which embodies its characteristics and is likely the first of its kind, though others may follow quickly in its footsteps. The Scott Pilgrim graphic novel series by Bryan Lee O’Malley fully demonstrates the attributes of a gamer realism text. Scott interacts with his world much as a gamer does with his game; he plays by a different set of rules, ones by which he more easily knows how to live. He can more comfortably inhabit a world where consequences are not as real or lasting, as fits his apathetic disposition. However, through an examination of this series of six volumes through the lens of gamer realism, Scott Pilgrim’s life takes on a tone which surpasses the whimsical façade of the books. These graphic novels comment on the effects of a life saturated with fantasy and detached from reality. The real world is not devoid of significance; it cannot simply be paused, easily saved, or switched off like a game. Rather, the lesson seen throughout the series is that a person can experience much of the excitement and fantasy found in a role-playing game if only he opens his eyes.
Realistic, Fantastic, and Esoteric Elements Fused

The first indications that this text seeks to emulate a video game, aligning with the aesthetic of gamer realism, become clear through the initial pages of the first volume: *Scott Pilgrim’s Precious Little Life*. As Scott returns to the apartment he shares with Wallace Wells, small informational text boxes appear to illuminate relevant setting details. These text boxes correspond to a similar sort which appear ubiquitously throughout numerous RPGs such as *The Legend of Zelda* or *Final Fantasy* series (1.14). Not only do these informational boxes clearly allude to RPGs and other games, but they also reveal much about Scott’s life and relationship to Wallace—that he essentially freeloads at Wallace’s apartment, sharing a bit of the rent responsibility, but nearly none of the amenities around the apartment. These informative text boxes appear throughout the rest of the series, providing information when necessary about people or things, which aids in grounding the narrative in reality through the “extensive use of detail” that Faris requires (O’Malley 1.13-14; Faris 169). Furthermore, they immediately set the stage for the series, clearly demonstrating the type of references to come.

Video game references abound throughout the text, alongside references to rock, film, and fantasy literature. This becomes representative of the entire gaming culture, immersed in obscure details, referencing them with nonchalance. He wears a coat with the X-Men symbol on its sleeve, and his band, called Sex Bob-omb, twists the name of an enemy character from the Mario video games called the Bob-omb. Likewise, Scott’s ex-girlfriend, Envy Adams, has a band called *The Clash at Demonhead*, taken from a video game with the same title (1.18). Even the font of the text which narrates the achievements made by Scott as he defeats exes or accomplishes something significant resemble the text found in early video games. However, not all references to gaming simply exist due to
novelty; the ultimate effect is to flesh out Scott’s world and to attempt to mirror the prevalence of the esoteric in gaming culture.

Some of these allusions demonstrate Scott’s ignorance of the world around him, something whose deeper effects will be explored with more depth later. Scott references the 1996 Danny Boyle film *Trainspotting* as though it should be a touchstone for his roommate not to worry about the fact that he is dating a high school girl. The initial problem comes with Scott referencing *Trainspotting* as anything comforting, but he completely misses the point, demonstrating a piece of his divergence from reality and consequences, as Wallace points out, “Okay, first of all, in *Trainspotting*, remember how he was freaking out and all worried? That was because he knows that it was sick and wrong and illegal. Secondly, remember how she was coercing him to date her?” (1.28). Scott has convinced himself that there is nothing wrong with dating an underage girl, particularly when there are six years between them, but he even misses the point of Wallace’s remonstrance: “No, dude, it’s not like that at all” (1.28). This early exchange epitomizes Scott Pilgrim’s worldview. He lives in his own world, by his own standards, at the outset of the series. He is dating a seventeen-year-old, living with a friend but paying for very little, he plays in a band which he is nearly apathetic about, he has no job, and he seems to have no ambitions to speak of. In short, Scott has fallen into a rut out of which he will have a difficult time climbing.

*Expressing the Game and Gamer Culture*

This journey also possesses a psychological component, for Scott still struggles with basic maturation, suffering from the Peter Pan syndrome. He is an eternal boy, a man-child—a professional slacker who never fully separated himself from his parents.
Freud asserts, in the opening lines of his short essay entitled “Family Romances,” that “[t]he separation of the individual, as he grows up, from the authority of his parents is one of the most necessary achievements of his development, yet at the same time one of the most painful” (37). Scott has spared himself the pain of ever having to develop beyond the maturity level of an adolescent. According to Campbell, this is a traditional, essential rite of passage which every culture celebrates. This is a ritual Scott either ignores or is unaware of, and this is a cause of some of the disorder he finds in his life: “The function of ritual…is to give form to human life, not in the way of a mere surface arrangement, but in depth…even in the patterns of our secular life, ritual survives” (Campbell, “Myths” 44). This particular ritual “has been achieved in some measure by everyone who has developed into a normal person” (Freud, “Family Romances” 37). Though Scott has not fully undergone this ritual, his parents have partially done it for him, as they moved away before the outset of this series.

Rather than embracing the fact that much of this separation process was done for him, Scott simply takes residence in the basement apartment of a house in close proximity to the house in which he grew up and continually relives his adolescence, playing video games, lacking a job, and dating a high school girl (O’Malley 1.35-36). Even the early informational text boxes in the “Ownership diagram” drive this point home (See Fig. 3). Scott’s apartment is not truly his own. With the exceptions of the “Clothes on floor and stuff,” and Scott’s “shoes lying around,” his coat, and the adolescent “lame poster,” nothing in the apartment belongs to Scott (1.14). There is only one shared bed, Wallace purchased Scott’s toothbrush for him, and Scott just wears Wallace’s socks. Scott demonstrates about as much ownership as a preteen.
This fixation on the childish, as well as his choice of living arrangements in a basement, demonstrates that Scott still seeks solace in the metaphorical womb, a comfortable, carefree, dark place. He unconsciously attempts to live out a “womb fantasy,” by existing in a place of safety and joy, free of responsibility and consequences (Freud, “Uncanny” 155). He does not recognize it as uncanny—as wrong—for he has never departed from it into the real world to identify it as anything other than normal. An adult “knows what is expected of him—that he should no longer play or fantasize, but take an active part in the real world” (Freud, “Creative Writer” 27). Scott does not understand or care about what society expects of him. The fact that Scott perceives his world as a video game or fantasy tale—or refuses to partake in any aspect of social responsibility—indicates that he has not progressed beyond childhood. Finally setting forth on his heroic journey, with all the inevitable changes that will ensue, remains essential for Scott’s development.

In order to enter into and maintain a mature relationship, the sign of adulthood, chronic slacker Scott Pilgrim must overcome his mistakes and defeat Ramona Flowers’ evil exes, literally battling the metaphorical emotional baggage of her past in order to become her future. These exes have banded together to form “The League of Evil Exes,” which is itself a gamer notion with all the melodrama and built-in hierarchy which Scott must overwhelm. This immediately corresponds to Joseph Campbell’s heroic journey. Campbell, as well as Sigmund Freud, would have recognized the notion of moving beyond living as little more than a man-child obsessed with video games and shrugging off any responsibility as a new form of a very traditional rite of passage. This is just a starting point for Scott. He begins as no more than a twenty-three-year-old mediocre-
bassist slacker who creepily dates a high school girl. He literally is trapped in the past, unable to move forward, existing in a world without real consequences. However, his meeting with Ramona begins his journey toward adulthood.

*Selective Physics and Physicality*

Scott Pilgrim is a skinny, geeky slacker without any discernible muscle mass or combat skills. In short, he is no Conan the Barbarian, after whom it can be argued is the archetype on which traditional fantasy heroes have been modeled. This fact should not be ignored. In traditional FRPGs or fantasy literature, “[t]he men are ‘real’ men: old and wise wizards with flowing robes, lean and athletic thieves or bards, or (best of all) ridiculously powerful, muscled warriors…[The texts] tend to be pretty heavy on displaying men with some kind of physical power, either the lean athletic kind or the brute muscular type” (Schut 112). None of these characteristics apply to Scott Pilgrim—in any way. The typical fantasy men represent some kind of ideal to which the player might one day aspire (whether in reality or simply in fantasy). Schut argues “that the presentation of body types in digital FRPGs—as in the Fantasy genre—provide fertile resources for men to play out the rough masculine ideal. Boys and men playing these games can indulge their… fantasies by playing as powerful men” (113). O’Malley does not bring this in; rather, he portrays Scott as a true everyman: out of shape, lazy, bored. Any aspirations Scott has to physical prowess persist solely within the range of his experience playing games. O’Malley defies the tradition of the well-built hero in order to demonstrate that tried and true adage of “It’s what’s on the inside that counts.” However, he does not stop with the sappy moral, demonstrating that Scott does have qualities, and their lack of inherent physicality is trumped by the physical manifestation of the game
world within the real world. These are rules which Scott can follow. His desire to be with Ramona is an emotional, interior desire; therefore, his interior skills become exteriorized to confront the world’s challenges.

Scott is in no way a master fighter. Much like Nintendo’s Mario—an overweight plumber—on the outside Scott has no clear physical assets, nothing to suggest he might be widely understood to be the greatest fighter in the area. He cannot be bothered to read an email or train for a battle he knows is coming, yet the utter slacker suddenly becomes a master warrior when faced with Ramona’s evil exes. While it might have been conceivable that he could be bulkier than drawn, he is an utter slacker. He puts off breaking up with his girlfriend, lazes about rather than putting in real practice for his band, and holds no motivations of finding—a job. He does not eat healthily, as his idea of a normal meal is eating a loaf of garlic bread; Ramona informs him of the potential consequences: “‘You’d get fat…you’d get totally fat.’ ‘I don’t think I’d get fat. Why would I get fat?’ ‘Bread makes you fat. Butter makes you fat.’ Bread makes you fat??’” (2.60). Without a healthy diet and no more exercise than picking up his bass guitar at the practices he sometimes attends, Scott does not demonstrate ideal health choices. His idea of preparing for a fight with Lucas Lee is to watch five movies, but he abandons this when he cannot get his hands on them. However, when eventually confronted with a physical aggressor, Scott suddenly displays stunning physical prowess. This embodies the idea of gamer realism: out of the blue, Scott transforms into a master fighter and swordsman when faced with Ramona’s evil exes. It seems as though the only place he might have gleaned knowledge of fighting is from a video game. Furthermore, emotion plays a significant role in Scott’s battles with the exes—on both sides of the
fight, and the fights will also lead to some sort of emotional realization or reflection. The state of Scott’s relationship with Ramona, as well as the strength—if any—of Ramona’s affection for the ex in question, indicates the eventual outcome of the conflict.


When Scott begins his initial battle with Ramona’s first ex, Matthew Patel, he begins to brandish his heretofore hidden gifts. This is not met with any consternation or
surprise by the onlookers, and is treated merely as an inconvenience by Scott, who urges his band-mates to get out of the way. Scott, seemingly endowed with no more skills than mediocre bass playing, begins fighting and winning, punching Patel high into the air and then flying to meet him, “going for the air juggle,” a combination move from two-player fighting games like *Tekken* or *Mortal Kombat* (1.135). None of this seems out of the ordinary or outrageous, especially as Scott’s band-mate and ex-girlfriend Kim states that Patel should have known better than to fight Scott, as “Scott’s the best fighter in the province” (1.135). Upon Scott’s victory, Patel bursts into coins ($2.10) just like the defeated enemies in some *Super Mario* games. They do not break bones, bruise knuckles, or blacken eyes; onomatopoeia and a few coins are the only pieces of evidence that their fight occurred.

Just as strength has nothing to do with physical prowess but the strength of feelings, weaknesses have their foundations in emotions, rather than a deficiency of strength. Scott defeats Patel easily, as he was Ramona’s first boyfriend in seventh grade and is the furthest removed from Ramona’s love life. Ramona, Campbell’s goddess who has bestowed her favors upon Scott, holds some sway over his victories. They dated out of convenience and there remain no lingering feelings, at least on Ramona’s part, so Patel enters the fray with a handicap. They combined their powers in order to defeat the other kids who would not leave Ramona alone. He was not one of the cool kids:

> It was football season, and the little jocks were in high gear. For some reason they all wanted [Ramona]. Matthew Patel was the only non-white, non-jock kid in the school. Probably for miles around, or in the entire state, for all I know. So, of course…we joined forces and took ‘em all out.
We were one hell of a team. Nothing could beat Matthew’s mystical powers combined with my brute strength. Nothing but pre-adolescent capriciousness. We only kissed the once, and we were quits after something like a week and a half. (1.144-146)

Patel and Ramona both acted as the Other, set apart from everyone else in school, fighting against the traditionally mainstream. Their relationship became the most significant time in his life, so Patel has embodied this throughout his life, going too far and becoming mainstream himself—as a hipster.

Patel embodies the hipster style, dressed somewhat like a pirate, because “Pirates are *in* this year!!” and bringing fireballs and demon hipster chicks (1.142). The demon hipster chicks battle it out with Scott’s friends, who represent the positive aspects of the independent nature of true gamers and gamer culture, not caring what other people think, dressing as they choose, in whatever style they please. Because of this independence, they inherently despise hipsters for their desperate desire to conform:

Hipsters are the infiltrators who spoil the resistance—the coolhunting collaborators and spies...The problem with hipsters seems to me the way in which they reduce the particularity of anything you might be curious about or invested in into the same dreary common denominator of how “cool” it is perceived to be. Everything becomes just another signifier of personal identity. Thus hipsterism forces on us a sense of the burden of identity, of constantly having to curate it if only to avoid seeming like a hipster. But are there hipsters, actual hipsters, or just a pervasive fear of hipsters? Hipster hatred may actually precede hipsters themselves...One
must start with the premise that the hipster is defined by a lack of authenticity, by a sense of lateness to the scene, or by the fact that his arrival fashions the scene—transforms people who are doing their thing into a self-conscious scene, something others can scrutinize and exploit. The hipster is that person who shows up and seems to ruin things—then you can begin to ask why this person exists, whether he is inevitable, whether he can be stopped, and what it will take. The hipster’s presence specifically forms the illusion of inside and outside, and the idea that others will pay for the privilege of being shown through the gate.

(Horning)

Patel conforms to this idea of the hipster in nearly every sense, and he is not only defeated because of Scott’s prowess and his distance from his failed relationship with Ramona, but from the animosity of the non-hipsters. Though there are hipsters who have infiltrated gamer culture, participating because they see others doing it rather than being driven by a passion for it, gamer culture relies on both individuality and camaraderie. This conflict between the gamers and the hipsters demonstrates the manner by which gamer realism depicts gamer culture and its struggles.

Ramona dated her second ex, Lucas Lee, in ninth grade. She acts just as apathetic toward him as she did with Patel, which immediately determines Lucas’ chances of defeating Scott. She says:

It might have been math class. I just know I remember there being a lot of drama…it was the ninth grade. He followed me around. He was a skinny little snot-nosed brat. He asked me out 96 times and I finally said
okay…we were fourteen or whatever. We were kids. There was no sex, no crime, no great heartbreak or romance. We sat on curbs and smoked…we broke up. We only went out for a month or something…and I didn’t even string him along or cheat on him with any cocky pretty boys. (2.108-110)

Lucas Lee has continued on just as he was when they dated. It was the highest point in his life, so he commodified it, selling out and making it his identity. When Scott first meets him, he looks and acts exactly as Ramona first described: sitting on a curb and smoking. He has no real desire to fight Scott, for he has become apathetic after Ramona left him. He offers, “Okay, look. Give me all your money, and I’ll let you live. I’ll tell Gideon you beat me up” (2.119). Lee decides to walk away, never having truly been invested in the romantic aspect of the relationship (or having sold out so long ago that he really does not care anymore). Lee cannot fight for Ramona, as there are no true emotions present to support him. However, Scott must defeat him, as Lee’s surrender is not an option. In a game, the player cannot move forward without a tangible victory—the boss will never simply surrender. Instead of fighting Lee, Scott plays to his pride and challenges him to a supposedly impossible skate trick: grinding down an impossibly long, winding, dilapidated stair-rail. He reaches a deadly “Cumulative Speed: Too Fast to Live,” and explodes into a shower of coins (2.123).

Scott collects all the coins Lee leaves behind—the amount has increased to $14—and he also receives a power-up item: a Mithril skateboard, which might increase his abilities of speed, kick, and will. As Lucas is a level-end boss, Scott’s reward is more than just moving forward, onto the next round. He gains something tangible, but because he did not prepare himself for it beforehand he cannot use it now. This is one of those
instances when Scott’s life choices might have come in handy in the future, but he still has time to regret his decisions.

In Volume 3, the third Evil Ex that Scott must confront is Todd Ingram. This battle is even more difficult for Scott, as Todd is not only Ramona’s ex, but he is in a band with—and dating—Envy Adams, Scott’s ex-girlfriend. As she is Scott’s weakness, Todd is harder to defeat than the earlier ones. When Todd and Ramona dated, they “were bad kids together…until he had some trouble at home and…ended up going vegan…” then he went away and dairy scientists “took [him] to their secret dairy lab and tested the crap out of [him]” (3.84).

Todd seems to have gone slightly insane, obsessed with being a vegan and fighting “the man” (3.84). He went all out, trying to prove his “love” for Ramona. He even punched a hole in the moon for her, causing “about thirty pages of explosions and tidal waves” (3.86). He only cares about showing off, not true substance—he does the same thing for Envy Adams when they begin dating. This produces a similar response from Scott as from the hipsters, for his dedication to his dietary preferences rings hollow, as it is soon revealed that he regularly cheats on his diet. His veganism is merely for show, as he knowingly eats a gelato. He puts on an act of pretension, though he is actually easily confused and shallow. He and Scott proceed with a “Bass Battle,” a clear pun on a gaming Boss Battle which mimics games like Guitar Hero or Rock Band (3.164). Scott is nearly defeated when he calls for “some kind of…last minute, poorly-set-up deus ex machina” (3.168). The Vegan police arrive to arrest Todd for veganity violations: “The rules are simple, Todd. No vegan diet, no vegan powers, bitch” (3.172). They de-veganize him and Scott head butts him “so hard he burst” into coins (3.178). Scott also earns an “extra life”—essentially a do-over, to be used at any point (3.179).

In Volume 4, *Scott Pilgrim Gets It Together*, Roxie Richter was a part of Ramona’s brief experimentation phase as a lesbian in college. While it did not last, Roxie still holds feelings for her which makes her all the more difficult to fight, yet Scott does not wish to fight her at first. Roxie taught Ramona how to use subspace to her advantage, empowering her and preparing her for the emotional warfare she later will go through. Unfortunately, Roxie remains hung up on Ramona. She begins to invade Scott’s dreams, which grow increasingly frenetic as he tries to escape her. The dream world and the real world begin to blend as characters move in and out of each other’s minds. However, this
invasion of his dreams and the relentless conflicts with the exes demonstrates to Scott
that he must begin to make a change.

Scott decides to make an adult decision, telling Ramona he loves her and wants to
make their relationship work in a mature way: “Ramona…I know you just play
mysterious and aloof to avoid getting hurt. I know you have reasons for not answering
my questions. And I don’t care about that stuff…Ramona, I’m in love with you…and I
know we can make this relationship work” (4.178). This change is immediately rewarded

Fig. 7. O’Malley, Bryan Lee, *Scott Pilgrim Gets it Together*, Vol. 4 (Portland, OR: Oni
in the only way the Scott can truly appreciate: he immediately earns +9999 experience points, levels up: “Guts +2, Heart +3, Smarts +1, Will +1”, and earns a powerful item: “the Power of Love” in the form of a sword with a heart on its hilt (4.179-181). He then fights Roxie with his new sword. His newly acquired power of love beats her—he slices her in two and she explodes into little pigs and bunnies, alluding to the Sonic the Hedgehog games, in which Dr. Robotnik stuffs his death machines with small animals. Scott and Ramona move in together having taken a significant step in their relationship.

In the gamer realism text, power comes from emotions and positive life choices.

Fig. 8. O’Malley, Bryan Lee, Scott Pilgrim vs. the Universe, Vol. 5 (Portland, OR: Oni Press, 2009) 84. Print.
Just as an ex loses or bears a weakness because he does not have the emotional strength of a loved one on which he can draw, if Ramona grows irritated or unsupportive of Scott as he battles an ex, Scott begins to lose the battle. Conversely, when she begins pulling for him, Scott’s strength returns and he can win. This becomes most prominent in Volume 5, *Scott Pilgrim vs. the Universe*, with the robot battles that occur sporadically throughout the volume. Scott and Ramona’s relationship starts to falter; they get into a fight, and the magic seems to start fading. Unfortunately, this is what has kept Scott alive during his battles with the evil exes. During a Halloween party, Robot 01, sent by “award-winning roboticists and hot” upcoming exes the Katayanagi Twins—who clearly allude to the game *Double Dragon*, which features fighting twins whose signature move was the hurricane kick, which they later use on him—begins to attack Scott (5.122, 81). At the outset of the volume, he and Ramona have not yet begun to fight, and he easily conquers the robot (5.23). However, as Scott relationship with Ramona begins to drift apart, a second robot arrives and begins to soundly pummel him.

Ramona steps out of the party to smoke a cigarette, brooding and irritated with Scott, causing the former victor to lose his fight (See Fig. 8). However, the moment she demonstrates concern for him, asking, “Is he okay down there?” Scott wins the fight again (5.94). Later in the volume, as Scott begins to fight the Katayanagi Twins, Scott begins to lose the battle because he does not have Ramona’s support; he has lost sight of that for which he keeps fighting. Furthermore, they berate Scott, making him doubt Ramona, who cheated on them, causing them to unite and to use their “twin-link” against him (5.123). The twins have taken Kim hostage, who fakes a text message from Ramona, telling Scott, “She believes in you” (5.130). Immediately empowered, Scott can defeat
the twins easily, unlocking a final achievement which will allow him to more easily confront the final boss: Gideon Graves. Scott’s victories are not completely his own, as they depend not merely on the “skills” he has learned from his life as a gamer, but also from the fact that he has begun to move on, past his utter selfishness, and toward a reciprocal relationship with another person.


These feats of selective physicality do not apply exclusively to Scott. In Volume 2, Ramona and Knives fight in a mall. Both Ramona and Knives are emotionally charged regarding Scott, which gives them power, just as Scott has while fighting the Katayanagi Twins. Knives, spurred on by a sense of devastation due to her break-up with Scott, attacks Ramona who has a newfound emotional connection to Scott. However, Ramona is
much more self-sufficient than Scott, and her entire sense of power does not revolve around him. Ramona rips apart a metal art installation to fight Knives, who begins leaping all over the mall’s interior. The scope of these actions does not surprise onlookers—essentially, they are not surprised that a girl might begin running up walls or leaping multiple stories, they treat it simply as though two people have started fighting in public. Scott’s sister Stacey comes the closest to this issue when she exclaims, “Ramona are you crazy?? You can’t just tear up giant metal art objects like that” (2.147). Stacey merely points out the rudeness of dismantling a horribly heavy piece of art installation, rather than doubting its possibility. The same is true when, in Volume 3, Ramona and Envy begin to fight. No one debates the apparent reality that Ramona can withdraw a giant hammer—which itself alludes to Mjolnir from Thor—from a small bag, let alone that she begins to beat Envy with it, who then appears relatively unscathed after being hurled into a wall. The physicality has not come into question—the idea that this world and its inhabitants reflect video game rules remains completely conceivable.

Just as people are not necessarily as they appear, neither is the world. Scott Pilgrim’s world contains selective physics. This can be seen in the way that Scott defeats Matthew Patel or the other exes, but also in the manipulation of the world by the characters. Ramona, who has existed in just as self-centered a state as Scott, also gains access to different, hidden aspects of the world around her. Using the Star Doors from Super Mario 64, Ramona can move through her world unseen, moving quickly from place to place. She takes shortcuts through life, and one of those paths takes her through Scott’s dreams: a deserted wasteland reflecting his true emotional state—which appears similar to the desert backgrounds of some levels of the Super Mario Bros. games (5.150).
This connection between them also acts as a form of fate, as they cross paths in the subspace (subconscious for Scott) highway before they ever meet in the real world. Also, though it is not clear at the outset, but because the highway can be used due to self-centeredness, Scott and Ramona’s love life will certainly not have smooth sailing.

Ramona also possesses a subspace suitcase—marked with a star—which is bigger on the inside (see Fig. 10). This alludes to the way that, in many video games, the characters can hold an infinite or excessive number of items despite the actual physical stature or conceivable pocket space of that character. Its storage capacity is “unknown” From it she pulls a hammer to defeat an enemy; she also hides Scott when he does not want to fight a girl, and the climax of the series takes place within that bag (6.162-188). The rules of the real world can be bent or broken in a gamer realist text, as long as it acts to service the story.

Alignment—Good or Evil?

Scott is surrounded by people who help him and girls who have loved him, despite his gross lack of redeeming qualities. Freud addresses this as a natural component of “egocentric stories” (“Creative Writer” 31). Due to Scott’s selfish nature, this is quite an egocentric story, yet it still reeks of fantasy: “If all the women in a novel invariably fall in love with the hero, this can hardly be taken as a representation of reality, but it can be easily understood as a necessary feature of a daydream”—a fancy which corresponds to the fantastical games filled with busty, willing women in which Scott would likely have immersed himself (“Creative Writer” 31). Furthermore, “The same is true if the other characters are sharply divided into good and bad, in spite of the rich variety of characters we encounter in real life; the ‘good’ ones are the helpers, the ‘bad’ ones the enemies and rivals of the ego that has become the hero of the story” (“Creative Writer” 31). This does not seem to align with reality, as his sore deficiency of likeable traits would surely drive everyone away. However, taken as an RPG which revolves around Scott, those in his world must align themselves with one side or the other. He has both
friends and enemies, helpers and detractors. However, those lines do not blur, despite his readiness to alienate the people in his life.

Scott Pilgrim, in an RPG, would fall into the category of a neutral-chaotic character at the series’ beginning. His attitude and approach toward life determines this quite clearly—he will, however, transform into a good-chaotic character as his journey progresses. The outset sees Scott without any regard to the rules of society: from living as a freeloader in his friend’s apartment to dating a seventeen-year-old to cheating on two girls, hurting both in the process. He does not consider what his actions might do to others. However, once he begins to see that, to gain Ramona’s trust and eventual love, he must make a decision about his alignment. First, he will align with her so that they can move forward together, but this also means that he will take a side against those who stand in their way: The League of Evil Exes, led by Gideon Graves, who used his relationship with Ramona “like some sick experiment,” figuring out methods of burrowing into her subconscious so that he can control her (6.163). Gideon has been doing this to girls for years—dating them in order to dominate their lives. He uses each girl’s subconscious against her, forcing himself in to make her love him—he is an evil-chaotic character, and Scott’s journey from apathy to justice demonstrates most clearly his character’s change of heart which gamer realism seeks to depict.

Scott was not always neutral-chaotic; he faced this type of struggle before attempting to date Ramona. Seven years prior to the series, Scott and his eventual band-mate Kim begin dating, and he must fight for her, rescuing her from would-be competitors. O’Malley uses this flashback at the beginning of Volume 2, *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*, in order to provide context for the remainder of the series and the battles Scott
will eventually face: “I had to fight a dude to get with her! I fought a crazy seven-foot-tall purple-suited dude! And I had to fight 96 guys to get to him, too! He was flying and shooting lightning bolts from his eyes and he could make people do whatever he said automatically! He was totally awesome! And I kicked him so far he saw the curvature of the earth!!” (3.87). Scott’s situation with Ramona and the League of Evil Exes is not the only time that Scott battled for someone’s heart. This cements Scott as a character whose traits can shift—he is not a static, hopeless character. If he once displayed good-chaotic qualities, those aspects can resurface once again. Using RPG rules of character development, O’Malley illustrates how the stereotypical gamer might behave at first, and then, once he ventures into the real world, seeking something better for his life, that person’s nature might begin to change.

_A New Mythology: Following the Hero on His Quest from the Virtual World into “The Desert of the Real”_

Scott Pilgrim uses gaming to negotiate the world around him, to deal with the impending responsibility and commitment of a relationship. He does not resort to playing games to accomplish this (although he does play games), but he uses what he knows of gaming in order to deal with the reality in which he now seems to exist. Video games, film, and music seem to have become the mythology or folklore of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, at least for Scott Pilgrim and others like him. Just as modernist authors such as T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, the romantics including Byron, Keats, and Shelley, or centuries of predecessors infused their writings with both obscure and obvious references to classical literature, allusions to video games, rock, film, and fantasy literature permeate O’Malley’s series with just as much ease. While Eliot might call upon
Homer, Ovid, and Virgil, O’Malley calls upon Nintendo, Neko Case, and Plumbtree. In fact, those references are so ubiquitous throughout the texts that they seem endless. Even so, O’Malley retains a referential link to the classical mythological structures with Scott Pilgrim’s name. It evokes a Bunyan or Dante-esque figure, albeit a secular one, traveling throughout the wasteland of life in search of meaning; this is the same type of archetypal quest embarked upon by Scott Pilgrim: that of a hero in search of his love (O’Malley 1.38-40). Yet, even with this classical allusion, O’Malley still retains his own new mythological reference: “Scott Pilgrim” is a track from the 1992 album *Predicts the Future* by Plumbtree. This fusion of classical and modern mythology characterizes the very nature of the series: a classic tale of love and struggle told in a new, hybrid format.

Not only does O’Malley’s series seamlessly employs re-mythologized elements from ubiquitous sources of late twentieth and early twentieth century entertainment, but the text itself adopts a classical form of mythological storytelling through the hero’s journey. He constructs Scott’s journey along the same course as the traditional heroic path established by Campbell in his seminal work *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. O’Malley, however, repurposes Scott’s trek to incorporate new, modern mythology. Therefore, the text abounds with references, not to the classical allegories of Hercules, Odysseus, Jason, or Aeneas, but to new mythic characters such as Link from *The Legend of Zelda*, Mario from the *Super Mario Bros.* games, or his namesake from the Plumbtree album. The structure remains true to its mythological origins while also containing a new structure. Scott must brave a series of trials to achieve his goal of attaining love and glory. O’Malley depicts this journey through the lens of a video game, as Scott ascends through levels, defeating “bosses,” winning achievements before reaching the final level,
earning the boon: the ability to truly have a relationship with Ramona and engage with the real world as a mature adult. He must defeat Ramona’s seven evil exes in sequential order to finally earn the right to be with her.

Campbell constructs the hero’s journey as a series of steps in which he gains more experience and understanding, allowing him to eventually win the battle and gain his goal. “A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won” (Campbell, Faces 30, emphasis original). Scott Pilgrim, the modern wanderer, begins the series as a lonely everyman, an aimless and lazy, emotionally and relationally stunted twenty-three-year-old. He lacks any inspiration to move forward with his life, to achieve anything, content to simply exist, comfortable living nearly in the shadow of the home in which he grew up. He has not really moved beyond high school maturity: he dates a seventeen-year-old named Knives Chau, he has no job, and he plays in a band. Living only for himself, stuck inside his own head, he is in fact unhappy despite a carefree exterior. He lives squarely in the “world of the common day,” without ambition or drive, and awaiting—unbeknownst to him—a “call to adventure” (Campbell, Faces 58). This call comes from a “figure that appears suddenly as a guide,” beckoning the hero to move forward (Campbell, Faces 55). Unconsciously, he slips into the subspace highway. There he meets Ramona, who simply uses “this really convenient subspace highway [which] happens to run through [Scott’s] head” as she delivers packages for Amazon.com: “It’s like three miles in fifteen seconds” (O’Malley 1.80). Ramona Flowers appears to Scott in a dream, and though she does not yet beckon him to adventure directly, she acts as a beacon for him to follow. They begin his journey together, and though he does not know
what the goal it at the outset, she guides him onto the path that his adventure will take. The journey is more about Scott’s transition from immaturity to adulthood—this is the central theme. Scott also follows Schut’s idea of the “Conquistador Complex” (113). This metaphor mirrors Scott’s forays into many uncharted territories: responsibility, selflessness, and ultimately love. What he must remember is that “Exploration is usually a violent ordeal, as it is often impossible to pass through a territory without cleansing it of its native inhabitants, such as hostile orcs, dangerous trolls, poisonous giant spiders, undead skeletons, and the like” (Schut 113). While Scott does not encounter these creatures, those he does meet are just as dangerous: jilted lovers out for revenge, demon hipster chicks, and the occasional robot. His growing relationship with Ramona acts as a natural outgrowth of that transition into maturity, but they are not mutually exclusive.

As Scott’s Virgilian guide, Ramona does not remain with him at all times; similarly, Virgil begins the journey with Dante, but he must depart after a while so that Dante may continue ahead, guided by faith. This call indicates “that destiny has summoned the hero and transferred his spiritual center of gravity from within the pale of his society to a zone unknown” (Campbell, Faces 58). Scott must leave his boring, sheltered world and step into one where actual danger may lurk along his path.

Scott’s world is no longer mundane, but begins to transform into a magical place where most things are possible. O’Malley painstakingly recreates real-world locations, amplifying them with the informational text-boxes, grounding the narrative in reality, only then does he begin to weave in the fantastical elements. Of course, these new elements do not faze Scott; though he does not know what a subspace highway is, he merely tries to associate them with the way he views the world asking, “Is it like in Super
“Mario 2?” (1.80). Likewise, while at a Clash at Demonhead show, Sandra asks Scott if he and Ramona are an item, the first thing that Scott thinks of is an item from a video game—specifically the *Super Mario* games.

Video games have become Scott’s primary method of relating to the real world, and the realistic world with actual, identifiable locations, responds with malleability. This
transforming of the world follows Campbell’s model, as whatever form the new world takes, “it is always a place of strangely fluid and polymorphous beings, unimaginable torments, superhuman deeds, and impossible delight” (Campbell, *Faces* 58). Once the journey begins, Scott Pilgrim’s world contains selective physics mirroring the supernatural aid which Campbell requires; this will act as an “[amulet] against the dragon forces he is about to pass” (Campbell, *Faces* 69). This aids in constructing Scott as a paradox, modeled after video game heroes yet not outwardly a hero himself.

Scott moves forward, his curiosity piqued by the appearance of his divine guide, Ramona Flowers, whom he desires to begin dating. However, a hero’s adventure does not truly begin until “The Crossing of the First Threshold” (Campbell, *Faces* 77). He must move beyond the status quo and into the dark unknown of the danger which lies before him. This is “the first step into the unexplored,” and it is the most significant step (Campbell, *Faces* 78). Before the journey can proceed much further, the hero must move past the guardian of the threshold “at the entrance to the zone of magnified power…Beyond [the guardian] is darkness, the unknown, and danger” (Campbell, *Faces* 77). Soon after Ramona and Scott meet, before they begin officially dating, and as his band begins playing a show, a disturbance occurs. This intrusion takes the form of a young man, crashing through the ceiling and hurtling toward the stage, “Mr. Pilgrim! It is I, Matthew Patel! Consider our fight…BEGUN!!” (1.132). Patel, the first of Ramona’s exes, arrives to battle Scott and quickly meets defeat. Scott solidifies his participation in this new supernatural world by defeating the guardian to the threshold of the unknown.

With Scott’s decision to fight Patel, he simultaneously decides that he will pursue Ramona—both the boon and the goddess of Campbell’s journey. This choice thrusts him
into “The Belly of the Whale,” the metaphorical unknown, the point of no return, which
sets him on “The Road of Trials” (Campbell, Faces 90, 97). This new point in the hero’s
journey marks the beginning of a change in him; having been “swallowed into the
unknown” the hero may “appear to have died,” indicating that a transformation will occur
in him (Campbell, Faces 90). The first defeat signifies the start of a long journey, “only
the beginning of the long and really perilous path of initiatory conquests and moments of
illumination” (Campbell, Faces 109). Scott Pilgrim’s excursion will be a transformative
one, and he will not be recognizable by journey’s end. This will not simply be a journey
toward meaningless sex, but toward a meaningful relationship. Love becomes both a
driving force and a source of power for Scott. The entire graphic novel series becomes a
metaphor for the beginning of a relationship. With each victory over an ex, Scott gains
something, starting small and eventually gaining the tools that he needs to overcome the
final boss, Ramona’s most significant ex: Gideon Graves.

At first these achievements come in the form of coins, but then Scott earns
experience points. Special items also appear such as a Mithril Skateboard—Mithril being
a mythical metal created by J.R.R. Tolkien in The Lord of the Rings—the Power of Love
in sword-form, an extra life, and the Power of Understanding as an even bigger sword
(O’Malley 2.123; Foster 340). With each of these achievements, just like the rewards
gained in a video game after defeating a boss, Scott moves closer to defeating Gideon,
while also metaphorically earning the tools to begin a healthy relationship with Ramona.
This aligns with Faris’ magical realist notion of “a metaphor made real” as Scott’s battle
with Ramona’s exes mirrors the “battle” that every couple must go through in some form
as they begin their relationship; each couple must deal with the other’s emotional
baggage and learn to trust one another (Faris 176). In this case, the emotional baggage is made physical, and love is truly a battlefield.


Once the hero embarks upon the road of trials, he seeks what has lured him, the aspiration of his journey: the goddess. The goddess “is the paragon of all paragons of beauty, the reply to all desire, the bliss-bestowing goal of every hero’s…quest. She is mother, sister, mistress, bride…she is the incarnation of every promise of perfection” (Campbell, *Faces* 110-111). Classically, the goddess is Dante’s Beatrice or Odysseus’
Penelope; Ramona Flowers is Scott Pilgrim’s goddess. Ramona as the goddess epitomizes this text’s modernization of classical mythological tropes. While the traditional goddess seems passive, waiting for her rescuer-lover, Ramona acts, taking care of herself, and working in tandem with Scott to achieve a similar goal in developing a healthy relationship. She can battle just as well as he, fighting Scott’s ex-girlfriends to surpass their emotional hold on him. In this way, she not only represents the goddess—the “woman as the temptress”—but the guide along Scott’s heroic journey, both the goal and the partner (Campbell, *Faces* 120). However, Ramona is not the typical goddess; she is a fallible woman with her own problems. She is suddenly seduced away from Scott—potentially to her doom.

There is a point along the hero’s road of trials where it seems that all might be lost. Just before a final battle in which the goal is finally attained—as is inevitable in such a quest—is a loss of faith, where the trial becomes too great and doubt creeps in. He is lost, unable to function, beginning to regress to the place he was at the outset of the series. This place calls back to the bleak desert scenes of some of Nintendo’s *Super Mario Bros.* games. Atonement must be made, often with the father; this can simply take the form of an abandonment of the guilt due to former transgressions and negativity. In this case, Scott—the gamer who has ruined his life: both the subject of a cautionary tale and the hero who rises up to defy his circumstances—does not need to atone with his father, or even another person. Rather, this form of atonement sees a person coming to terms with himself and his fear of the consequence of his sins. Freud links this to the uncanny doppelganger. “These ideas arose on the soil of boundless self-love, the primordial narcissism that dominates the mental life of both the child and primitive man, and when this phase is surmounted, the meaning of the ‘double’ changes: having once been an assurance of immortality, it becomes the uncanny harbinger of death” (Freud, “The Uncanny” 142). The appearance of this double, the manifestation of the former narcissism and selfishness of childhood, evokes a feeling of the uncanny in the adult, becoming “an object of terror” (Freud, “The Uncanny” 143). Scott Pilgrim suffers from an unsettling encounter with his own inner demons in the form of Negascott.
Negascott, an modern mythological allusion to Dark Link, the negative doppelganger of the protagonist from the Zelda game series, is the physical manifestation of Scott’s negative attributes which he has attempted to suppress. Rather than simply avoiding or restraining his pain from Ramona’s brief departure, he has cordoned off that aspect of itself, and it now plans to rear its ugly, dark head. Scott seeks to destroy this embodiment of his negative aspects, “I just need to kill him…so I can forget her…and move on!!!” (6.74-75). However, these feelings and experiences are unavoidable. His ex-girlfriend Kim shouts, “But if you keep forgetting your mistakes, you’ll just keep making them again!...Everything you’ve done wrong is just gonna keep following you around, Scott!” (6.76-77). This finally forces Scott to take stock of his recent past mistakes, and
that he cannot simply move on without learning anything. This forces a re-integration of
the two Scotts, and Scott—experiences intact—can now “fight to earn her back” (6.86).
Scott has achieved atonement with himself and decides to make mature decisions to
achieve the ultimate boon.

Nearing the end of his quest, Scott confronts Gideon Graves, the final evil-ex and
the mastermind behind the whole league at his lair: the Chaos Theatre. Graves is the final
boss in the game of Scott’s life, the evil who must be defeated in order for Scott to claim
his final treasure. It is fitting he resides at the Chaos Theatre, as he seeks only to destroy,
rather than preserve, the purity of Scott’s desire for a relationship. Ramona’s betrayal of
Scott empowers him, having orchestrated it; the league was meant to destroy their
relationship, as much as to destroy Scott himself. He reaches into Scott’s chest, steals the
Power of Love from him, and offers to make Scott a member of the league of evil exes,
“Join me, Scott, and I will complete your training. Together we can rule Ramona’s future
love life!” to which Scott responds: “I’ll never join you!!!” (6.120). Despite the clear
paraphrasing of The Empire Strikes Back, Scott does not get away with a simple refusal.

With the sword of love, Gideon stabs Scott through the heart. This represents the point in
any break-up, whether or not reconciliation is achieved, where a person reaches the
lowest point possible, particularly when confronted with someone else involved in the
painful situation. Scott’s heart is quite literally broken at this point, and he dies from
these wounds.
Scott arrives in a sort of subspace purgatory, much like the places about which he has dreamed throughout the prior installments of the series. There, he meets Ramona, who apologizes to Scott, saying that she does not “want to be that person anymore. So…I’m sorry Scott” (6.135). Despite Scott’s death, she reminds him of his life again. They reconcile and resolve to join forces, which brings up the fact that “Scott had an extra life!” (6.139). He comes back to life, joined by Ramona, and they ally against Gideon. No longer are they battling separate enemies; it took this entire journey for the two of them to realize that, though life is a battlefield, they must fight it together. This is the apotheosis, when the hero is reborn by “a second birth” and achieves some form of enlightenment (Campbell, *Faces* 162).
He has achieved an understanding about what is expected of him as a participating member of a relationship: “that he should no longer play or fantasize, but take an active part in the real world” (Freud, *Daydreaming* 27). Gideon then uses his secret weapon he created: The Glow. It makes everyone like him, “seals you inside your head. Just you and your issues. And once you’re hit, that’s it. No cure. It’s chronic” (6.158). He has lived his entire live utterly self-involved, so he wants to make everyone else that way, entering their heads and brainwashing them. Scott also suffers from chronic self-involvement, which is why he seemed so attractive to Ramona; he was much like Gideon. This realization allows Scott to identify with Gideon, but he realizes what he might become. He gains the greatest power of all: “The Power of Understanding,” for what is love without understanding its terrible power and how to properly use it (O’Malley 6.197)? He has attained a sort of enlightenment through his death and resurrection: his apotheosis.

Both Scott and Ramona stand up to Gideon; united they defeat him using his own selfishness against him. Finally, upon Gideon’s defeat, $7,777,777 in coins rains down on the crowd of onlookers, and Scott and Ramona can finally begin a relationship having dealt with their emotional baggage—this is Scott’s “ultimate boon,” the achievement of his goal, the attainment of the grail (Campbell, *Faces* 172). The boon represents more than a simple monetary or physical prize, but the culmination of the entire journey. This “signifies that the hero is [now] a superior man” (Campbell, *Faces* 173). He is no longer the utterly immature slacker from the outset of the story. He was led to something, driven by a desire other than laziness.
The final decision the hero makes regards the return to the world: will he distribute his knowledge and help change the world, or will he remain in the bliss of his newly changed state? “[T]he responsibility has frequently been refused,” the heroes often deciding to stay away with the goddess (Campbell, *Faces* 193). Scott and Ramona, rather than explicitly returning to an apartment together or having a traditional wedding, simply step through one of the Star Doors which populate Scott’s world—a clear allusion to the “Star Doors” from *Super Mario 64*—and disappear into subspace nothingness.

Bryan Lee O’Malley’s *Scott Pilgrim* graphic novel series clearly demonstrate themes of classical mythology as seen through the lens of modern mythological allusions.
Despite Joseph Campbell’s wariness to label anything newly made as potentially mythological, he establishes some criteria for what might become myth. If a person enters the collective consciousness, becoming a role model for others, he or she has become mythologized. Therefore, other aspects of the collective consciousness would also fit: literature, music, video games. After the publication of *The Lord of the Rings*, people put on Middle-earth weddings; Isabella and Jacob, two characters from Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight Saga* are the most common baby names of the last year; thousands of people attend fantasy, science fiction, and comic book conventions and discuss those things with as much fervor as other people discuss politics or religion (Parenting.com). Mythology is a set of cultural norms understood by common references; in today’s pluralistic culture, there exist myriad mythological systems, and some people can utilize multiple systems. Story archetypes and themes remain the same, however. The means of conveying the myth differ, though myths have shifted continuously throughout time.

*Side-quests and Mini-games*

Just as any complex video game is constructed, the main crux of the story is not the only thing that a character might do. Life acts in much the same way: a person does not only act in accordance with the much looked for end goal; other things drive people, and other events get in the way and distract from the objective. In a game, these are called side-quests or mini-games. A character can earn experience points (XPs) for successfully completing side-quests: Scott faces multiple mini-games within the larger context of his quest for maturity.
For example, in Volume 3, *Scott Pilgrim and the Infinite Sadness*, as Scott prepares to battle Ramona’s third evil ex, Todd Ingram—who currently dates Scott’s ex-girlfriend Envy Adams—they have a small initial battle. This simply acts as a test of their wills before the eventual showdown, spurred on by Envy’s manipulation, but they both go along with it. She takes them to Honest Ed’s, a large discount department store filled to the brim with items that utterly overwhelm Scott and Todd and evokes in them a “stark existential horror” (3.63). Envy orders that “you guys are going to go in there…you have to, um, survive, and get to the other end, and, you know, kill each other, or whatever” (3.60). They must fight through the Wal-Mart-like terror of a department store,
assembling items along the way to in order to defeat one another. Here, O’Malley plays on a racing game like *Frogger* in which the player must dodge obstacles in order to reach the end. They can scavenge parts to protect themselves or to take out the opponent--Todd makes “a rifle assembled from household items” while Scott dons protective gear: a bike helmet, wraparound sunglasses, and hockey gloves, much like some survival games like *Dead Rising*. However, Honest Ed’s brings out an existential crisis in Todd, causing him to falter just at the point of Scott’s defeat. Scott, who as yet has not grown enough to experience an existential crisis, survives the incident and readies himself for another bout at the end of the volume. This side-quest demonstrates the waning control that Envy holds over Scott. Though she still emotionally affects him, she cannot fully manipulate him any longer. While he still has a good distance to go in his journey toward maturity, he is on the right path.

In the early parts of *Scott Pilgrim Gets It Together*, volume four in the series, Scott has a dream. In it, Scott finds himself walking through a forest—both the metaphorical forest of life and an allusion to Nintendo’s *Legend of Zelda* role-playing game, down to Scott’s attire—and a forest elf keeps asking him, “Do you know the code?...The forest holds many secrets” (4.51-52). Scott replies, “I don’t know the stupid cheat code, okay? I’ll learn the secrets the old-fashioned way” (4.52). Scott has learned that he needs to grow up and take responsibility. This is a new realization, for at the start of Volume 3 he still attempted to reach a save point—the place in a video game which would allow him to respawn and start over, eliminating any consequences of defeat. It is not until the end of that volume, once he has overcome his the most dangerous ex to that point, that he can earn an extra life. He may not be all the way there yet, but he realizes to
do some things the hard way—and he needs to get a job. Again, the only way that Scott can relate to the world is through video games. He asks his band-mate, Stephen Stills, for a job at his restaurant. For this “achievement,” Scott earns 500 experience points, just as he might in a RPG for accomplishing a task; he asks, “So it’s more or less like a video game, you’re saying? Kind of a ‘job system?’” (4.60). This step toward maturity, despite being shadowed by a video game, brings Scott and Ramona closer, without battling an ex at this point in the volume, but the more experience points he gains, the better he gets at their relationship.

Finally, Scott slips through a star door and into subspace while trying to find Ramona. He accidentally comes across her there, scantily clad—much like Princess Leia in *Return of the Jedi*—and sitting near a shadowy figure. Like any relationship, Ramona has secrets, and because Scott has been running in and out of subspace, he finds her. He finally decides to make another mature decision, saying, “I know you just play mysterious and aloof to avoid getting hurt. I know you have reasons for not answering my questions. And I don’t care about that stuff…Ramona, I’m in love with you…and I know we can make this relationship work” (4.178-179). Scott makes the decision not to be shallow about everything; rather than running away from his problems, he decides to work through them, to make his life better. This choice results in a new achievement—one won before even battling Roxie, but allowing him to easily defeat her because now he has one of the greatest weapons of all. Protruding from his chest is a flaming sword, along with power-ups and increases in guts, heart, smarts, and will (RPG-style), “Scott earned the power of love” (4.181). He immediately defeats Roxie (who bursts into animal friends, just as enemies do in *Sonic the Hedgehog*), earns another 9999 experience points, and takes a significant step toward solidifying his relationship with Ramona.

As Scott finally defeats the last evil ex, he does not merely win Ramona; rather, he has gained understanding about himself and who he has been in the past, before the beginning of the series. Therefore, he will not only begin to have a meaningful relationship with the girl he loves, but he will also start to live life as though it has meaning outside of himself and his base desires. This entire journey has led him to that point, through a series of battles as well as realizations. This key example of gamer realism sees Scott Pilgrim living his life as though it is an RPG, with the world
manifesting itself as one of those games, its natural laws sublimating themselves to the laws of the game.

Conclusion

Gamer realism remains in its infancy as gamer culture continues to face scrutiny from academia. Because of this, and due to the rise in attention paid to gamer culture, gamer realist texts will continue to rise. These texts both speak to and document a significant culture, commenting on those within that culture who have become so immersed that the rest of the world has fallen away. The protagonists seek—whether of their own volition or due to some calling—to break away from the isolation and emotional stunting to which the obsession with excessive gaming leads, and these texts document that journey. Gamer realism reincorporates a new form of mythology, playing upon the tropes of traditional myths yet depicting them in a new way.

Bryan Lee O’Malley’s Scott Pilgrim series of graphic novels demonstrates the way that the gaming culture can permeate a text, seeking to push its protagonist forward, beyond the obsession and stereotypes, and toward a better life. These texts demonstrate the deeply rooted nature of gaming in twenty-first century Western culture, but also that gaming is not the ultimate aspiration. Scott sees a distorted world—one where life is a video game with him as the main character. He essentially lives the dream of many twelve-year-old boys—and he has not moved far beyond that level of maturity. Gamer realism seeks to identify with people like Scott Pilgrim, demonstrating to them that life exceeds the parameters of a game; it uses gaming vernacular, allusions to the popular culture of gamers, in order to simultaneously expose the stunted nature of much of that
culture and establish a precedence that, in order to participate in such a culture, a person does not need to inhibit himself.


