THEATRE AND THE VIDEO GAME: BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

DISSERTATION

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By

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ABSTRACT

As technology is altering the world, electronic games are changing the face of popular entertainment, infecting spectators with a craving for spectacle and interaction. Games allow viewers to become active participants in dramatic narrative, transforming audience into performer. The game player is joining in a mediatized theatrical experience that reshapes notions of performance, theatre, and audience.

The first theatre scholar to connect theatre, computers, and performance was Brenda Laurel. Speculating on the nature of user interaction with the computer, Laurel used the Aristotelian elements of dramatic structure to create a new poetics for interactive fantasy generated in the computer realm. Since Laurel’s initial work in 1986, games have evolved beyond those of her pioneering study, creating a level of theatrical experience worthy of critical examination. The games from the late 1990’s and into the current century show a level of complexity in design and narrative that compels a re-examination of what has been dismissed by many as escapist entertainment. The electronic game industry has adopted theatrical devices and principles to produce a live, non-repeatable, and new form of theatrical experience.

My research draws from traditional theatre theorists (such as Aristotle, Bertolt Brecht, Adolphe Appia, and Augusto Boal), modern theatre and performance theorists (such as Brenda Laurel, Janet Murray, Gay McAuley, and Richard Schechner), and game
design theorists (such as Steven Poole, Bob Bates, and Richard Rouse), to assess the electronic game as a new and distinctive form of performance. This dissertation will examine a variety of computer and video games from five perspectives: 1) space 2) plot structures, 3) character, 4) theme, and 5) interactivity, with a view to articulating the modes of kinship between games and live performance. In recognizing and articulating such relationships, both gaming and theatre benefit, strengthening the aesthetic and structural creation of performance through technological means while recognizing the evolution of the current century audience from passive to active, spectator to player/performer.
For my mother and my grandfather
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCING BEAUTY TO BEAST: CONNECTING THEATRE & GAMES

In the year 2000

- In the year 1999, the video game industry in the USA posted revenues of $6.6 billion in favorable comparison to the film industry, which posted $7.3 box office revenue.
  - 60% of all Americans play computer and video games – 145 million Americans.
  - Average age of players is 28 years old. 37% are under 17, but 61% are 18 and over.
    - 43% of these players are female.

In the year 2001

- Worldwide, there are over 100 million computer game consoles.
- In the USA sales of games now outnumber sales of books.

In the year 2002

- Norrath, a virtual country (the setting for the online game, Everquest), was ranked as the 77th richest country in the world between Russia and Bulgaria.
- In July of 2002 the country of Greece banned all electronic games across the country applying heavy fines to all users including visitors from abroad. The legislation was determined to be unconstitutional and quickly overturned.

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1 Timothy Lenoir and Henry Lowood, "How They Got Game: The History and Culture of Interactive Simulations and Video Games," Grant Proposal. 2000, Stanford University, 9 Sept. 2002 <http://www.stanford.edu/dept/HPS/VideoGameProposal>. Figures are predominantly cited as being from a poll conducted by Peter D. Hart Associates but full citations are lacking in the text.


In the year 2003

- Combined sales for computer and video games exceeded $7 billion for the first time ever.
- A record number of console video games sold more than one and ½ million units.

Live in your world.

Play in ours.

--Playstation2 Advertising Slogan

In a darkened room, a screen flickers illuminating an individual. The screen is filled with strange visual images: zombies, demons, faceless men, and werewolves rush through the streets of London in the late 17th century, bent on destruction. Tonal music mixed with growls, moans, and footsteps creates an eerie milieu. The individual twitches slightly, gaze locked upon the screen. Enrapt by the onslaught of malevolent creatures, the individual begins a furious progression of hand gestures, punching a joystick to fight free of the grip of evil. The individual embraces the game, becoming the hero. The hero, a polygonal character on the screen, is driven by the individual, melding reality and fantasy. The joystick becomes the sword of the valiant, reigning bloody carnage on the screen villains. The heart rate and breathing of the individual increases, swept up in the thrill of the encounter, living in the moment. Finally, the creatures are dead and the hero stands bleeding, pausing to catch a breath, and waiting to decide where to go next in this virtual world. The individual is elated. Triumphant in having vanquished evil, the individual releases the joystick and regains awareness of the present world. Like an actor stepping offstage, the individual slips from the fantastic world of the game back to reality.


6 Nightmare Creatures, Kalisto Entertainment (Los Angeles: Activision, Inc., 1997), PlayStation Game. This is a rough outline of the playing experience. An individual is referenced as the player rather than...
Games, like theatre, allow us to translate our experiences. Although often regarded as escapist or trivial, video games interpret the modern world. Rich with visual imagery, textual symbolism, and interactive potentials, the games of today are constructed to evoke an illusion of total involvement in an imaginary universe. While playing, the user is swept into a world governed by strict conventions, easily recognized, and mutually accepted by all players, much like in a theatrical production. Game players assume roles that can disregard or reflect their own gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and/or personality. The player controls the nature of his/her participation, abiding by the conventions of the form. It is only through this *willing suspension of disbelief* (as expressed by Samuel Taylor Coleridge) that the gamer becomes a performer, inhabiting a narrative within a unique, fictional, virtual world.

This connection between games and theatre is relatively unexplored. I draw on a metaphorical naming to articulate the larger concerns of this study. Theatre is beauty. Videogames are the beast. Theatre, a historically feminized art form, has a rich, often troubled history that manages to survive today despite being regarded as outdated, unable to connect with modern audiences. Games are masculine, combining the ‘geek’ culture of computers with the aggression manifested in the need to conquer and control. Often dismissed as escapist, popular entertainment with little artistic value, this commercially driven giant draws the masses into a technological embrace. In examining these two contrasting art forms, a kinship is immediately recognizable. Both theatre and video games create live, non-repeatable, interactive experiences that entice and beguile suggesting a particular gender for the player. Character that is being played is *Nadia F.*, scientist, fencer, and gymnast. See Appendix B for full outline of story and characters.
audiences. By connecting the two, both theatre and the electronic gaming industry stand to benefit, each becoming stronger by recognizing and articulating the structural, aesthetic, and performative similarities between the two.

**The Basic Problem: Games and Theatre**

Over two decades ago, Brenda Laurel linked computers and theatre in her dissertation, *Toward the Design of a Computer-Based Interactive Fantasy System*. Written in 1986, this work examined the possibility of allowing the fantastic to become realized through the computer game. Using Aristotelian elements of structure as a premise, Laurel presented a new poetics for interactive fantasy generated in the computer realm. Following this, she published her well-known *Computers and Theatre* in 1991, which articulated a connection between the nature of the computer interface and the interactive dynamic inherent in theatre. Considered the first scholar to connect the theatrical experience to computers, Laurel’s work has spanned a vast number of topics in the computer industry from interface design to game design. *Utopian Entrepreneur* examines her foray into the gaming industry as she developed and marketed a line of games for young girls. New media theorist, computer programmer, industry innovator, and passionate educator, Laurel’s work began the connection between theatre and computers.

Laurel provided a possible design for interactive drama based on computer games. Building on this early work, I demonstrate that electronic games have not only achieved that potential, but have instead gone beyond it, reaching a level of theatrical experience worthy of critical examination. The games from the late 1990’s and into the early 21st century show a level of complexity in design and narrative that compels a re-examination
of what has been dismissed by many as merely an escapist entertainment. The nature of the electronic game is inherently theatrical, focused on a live, non-repeatable experience. As such, the video game can be examined as a theatrical form of art. Theatre, with its centuries long history of performance, literature, and criticism, provides the tools to examine and evaluate the video game as an artistic happening. To do this, I examine a variety of computer and video games from the theatrical viewpoints of space, narrative structure, character, content, and performance.

Before going further, I must clarify the usage of the terms electronic game, computer game, and video game. For the purpose of this dissertation, I am using electronic games as a broad term to reference any game that is played on an electronic device such as a computer or television. I am aware that as technology continues to change and develop, this term includes games on cell phones, palm pilots, and other personal pieces of electronic equipment. Historically, the term includes the traditional freestanding arcade games and the handheld, battery-powered units that mimic their larger counterparts. For this inquiry, the use of this term is in keeping with this broad reference and games that require specific explanations in relation to their playing mechanism will be noted. In addition to electronic games, the term digital games is commonly used as another broad referent. As explained by Zimmerman and Salen in Rules of Play, the digital or electronic game has four traits: “1. Immediate but narrow interactivity, 2. Manipulation of information, 3. Automated complex systems and 4.
Networked communication." These games allow players to have a semblance of autonomy while encouraging communication and complex thought. An evolution of the traditional card and board games mixed with the imaginary scenarios possible in childhood role-play, electronic games evidence these four traits, taking the concept of play to a theatrical level of immersion and complexity previously unattainable.

The basic distinction between video and computer games is the equipment that the user engages with to play the game. The following is the basic definition for both types of games:

**Computer game** – a game distributed in digital electronic format (typically on disk or CD-ROM, or distributed via telecommunications link) designed for use on general purpose microcomputer systems.

**Video game** – a game distributed in digital electronic format (typically on a special proprietary cartridge or CD-ROM) designed for use on video game systems such as those manufactured by Sega and Nintendo. These systems are specialized microcomputers, optimized for game playing and designed to use television sets for display.

In addition to Kinney’s definition of video game, the term *console* is considered appropriate when referencing games played on the various systems such as PlayStation, X-Box, and Game Cube. Console games are considered distinct from arcade or computer games, distinguished by the hardware required to play the game. At present, the computer game is often designed to be played on both an individual and group basis while the video game is tied to a single player or a pair as indicated by the number of

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8 Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2004) 91. Salen and Zimmerman also point out that although these traits are common for the majority of games, the digital/electronic dimension embodies them more robustly.

controllers that come with the console. However, the gap between the two types of games is narrowing as PlayStation2, Game Cube, and X-Box go online, capable of allowing the video gamer online play similar to the computer experience. Software titles are being released simultaneously on computer and video platforms to allow for a greater infusion into the gaming population, lessening the distinction between gaming types.

The terms electronic game and game encompass both video and computer games. This is a relatively safe collapse of terminology as the difference between computer and video games is primarily located within the physical hardware on which the game is played.

For the purpose of this dissertation, game and video game are used throughout as the general reference terms. Additionally, when referring to games, I am often generalizing about the genres of games, which are of interest to this particular comparison between games and theatre. To that end, a more detailed discussion of genre later in this chapter indicates which genres and subgenres are being used as the primary focal points of study. Clarifications are made when the playing experience is changed or influenced by the game playing hardware. What is more important is the nature of the games themselves, articulated in space, narrative, and performance.

In the course of this introductory chapter, I will provide a brief history of the video game followed by an overview of recent research that attempts to combine theatre and computers. Next, I consider research and publications from the world of games and I identify those that I have found most useful in this study. This section also explains game genres and methods of play. It is essential to look beyond theatre and gaming as

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10 Video games systems can also allow for the use of a multi-tap device, allowing at least four players, but this is primarily used with types of games not germane to this discussion.
separate entities to come to grips with a way of understanding video games. The games themselves, such as the *Final Fantasy* series, the *Everquest* series, *Tomb Raider*, *Neverwinter Nights*, *Primal* and others, and gaming manuals provide much of the material for this study. In examining games, I have utilized various contemporary theorists and historians from a variety of fields such as Aristotle, Bertolt Brecht, and Augusto Boal (from theatre), Brenda Laurel and Janet Murray (from technology and theatre), Gay McAuley and Henry Jenkins (from performance and cultural studies) as well as Chris Crawford and Richard Rouse (from game design). It is also important that I offer my own definitions of key terms that are often used inappropriately when discussing aspects of our contemporary mediatized culture. These terms include interactive, mediatized, presence, virtual and performance.

Finally, I provide a brief overview of each chapter’s focus. The chapters move from a discussion of space to plot structure to character to theme finishing with a discussion of performance and interactivity. Throughout, I have found it necessary and essential to my research to create a series of diagrams to help explain the points I am making. These diagrams are included within the text to aid in the exploration and examination of games. In addition to the straightforward breakdown of game genres, I have created visual renderings of Aristotle’s, Brecht’s, and Boal’s ideas. While these diagrams have been designed to clearly explain my thesis, they are also a reminder that the gaming industry and theatre share – among other things – a strong visual world.

In order to seriously understand the game world I have had to immerse myself in it. I play to understand. Playing has made it possible for me to provide a detailed storyline and character analysis of various games that are predominant in this study.
These are found in Appendix B, drawing from the game manuals that accompany each game. Each game has a basic information sheet that indicates genre and platform as well as providing a short synopsis of the narrative and characters. The titles selected for this analysis are reflective of the commercial market, having been top sellers within the industry as well as innovators in the development of their respective genres.¹¹

**The Beginnings of the Beast: A Short History of the Video Game**

Gaming did not begin as a theatrical venture or even as a commercial entertainment tactic. Instead, the home of the video game was located in scientific experiments as computer engineers endeavored to develop programs to show the capabilities of computers. In 1961, MIT student Steve Russell created the first interactive computer game, *Spacewars*. The original precepts that prompted the creation of the game were the following:

*It should demonstrate as many of the computer’s resources as possible, and tax those resources to the limit.
*Within a consistent framework, it should be interesting, which means every run should be different.
*It should involve the onlooker in a pleasurable and active way – in short, it should be a game.¹²

These game precepts could easily be applied to production values, showing an initial kinship between the theatre and games. Science fiction novels by E.E. “Doc” Smith inspired the initial game. The game was simple. Two spaceships controlled by two

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¹¹ In many cases I am considering genres that are actually subgenres of larger groupings. This is due my need for story and character development as main points of discussion. Genre is becoming problematic in games, much as it already is in theatre, as several titles evidence traits of multiple genres making them difficult to classify.

players respond to a series of toggle switches. No sounds, no explosions, no frills; the first game was simple; it immediately pushed engineers to go further.

Two figures of importance followed the birth of *Spacewars* in differing paths. The first, Ralph Baer, is commonly credited as ‘The Father of Video Games.’ Baer, a consummate inventor, developed the first home gaming console. By attaching a console to a television, Baer began the home gaming revolution with the release of the Magnavox Odyssey in 1972. The Odyssey was capable of playing a two-player version of tennis – still no sound, no major graphics, and only capable of playing a single game. At the same time, a young man named Nolan Bushnell was creating a company that would be known as Atari. Bushnell is often cited as being ‘The Father of the Industry,’ developing the business side of what would become a major industry in the world entertainment market. In late 1972, Atari introduced its version of tennis via computer also known as *Pong* in a bulky stand-alone unit. Atari began creating games for commercial use, placing *Pong* arcade games in bars and pizza parlors. Video games were uncharted territory and as consumer demand began to rise, companies began scrambling to discover the secret of the video game and the means by which to make it available in the home market on a wider scale.

Alongside the development of the graphic game, the concept of adventure and text-based gaming entered the domain of the digital. In 1967, the game *Adventure* (originally known as ADVENT)\(^{13}\) was created. Unlike *Spacewar*, which was focused on shooting, *Adventure* was a meld of fantasy role-playing and computer technology,

\(^{13}\) J.C. Herz, *Joystick Nation: How Videogames Ate Our Quarters, Won Our Hearts, and Rewired Our Minds* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1997) 10-11. The game was known as ADVENT due to the limitations on file names – only the first six letters were used.
focused on puzzle solving and following a linear progression of narrative. Much like the paper game *Dungeons & Dragons*, the game generated a labyrinth for exploration while developing story and characters. With *Spacewar* and *Adventure* as examples, computer programmers had two directions to explore when developing games for this new and compelling technology.

The next great evolution came in 1978, as Japan attacked the United States market with a new title that brought life into a sagging industry. Toshihiro Nishikado at Taito developed *Space Invaders*, which remains a classic example of the arcade tradition. Atari’s main competitor, Midway, marketed the game in the States. With sound effects and color overlays, the game captured players and even caused a shortage of 100-yen-coins in Japan due to its overwhelming popularity. The game introduced the concept of the ‘high score’, pushing players to challenge their own scores as well as scores by others. In addition, the game could not be won. The aliens would always prevail, regardless of the skill of the player. Against this title, Atari broke new ground with the first sports simulation game, *Atari Football*. Amidst all this, the personal computer was developing and appearing in homes while video games remained connected to arcades, bars, and other social venues.

The early 80’s marked a highly successful time for the arcade, producing such titles as *Asteroids* (1979), *Pac-Man* (1980), *Donkey Kong* (1981), *Galaga* (1981), and more. Arcade revenues in the United States reached $5 billion dollars in 1981, with Americans spending more than 75,000 man-hours playing video games. At the same time, home video games systems were on the rise. In 1976, the Fairchild VES (Video

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Entertainment System) was released, introducing the home consoles. Although that particular console soon disappeared from the market, the Atari VCS (Video Cartridge System) 2600 was welcomed into homes in 1978 with a paddle and joystick controllers. Soon followed by Mattel’s Intellivision console in 1980, the development of the console created a home market for games. The games for these home systems were simple yet compelling as the home television became the new arcade. Alongside Atari and Intellivision, other consoles such as Coleco Vision (known for releasing the classic Donkey Kong in 1982), Adam, and Milton Bradley’s Vectrex. By 1985, these consoles were defunct and the home market stalled.

With the initial growth of the home market and the strength of the arcades in the 80’s, the world of game design began to expand and software companies began to emerge as major players in the industry. In 1979, four programmers left Atari and founded Activision, a software company which primarily developed titles for the Atari 2600. In 1982, the company released one of its most significant titles, Pitfall. This was the first game to feature running and jumping as the hero moved across the scrolling scene. This type of gaming was a break from the single screen visuals of the past. Now the player would receive the visual gratification of moving scenery as the hero, a digital Indiana Jones, swung from vine to vine in this action adventure. Another company, Imagic (1981) was founded by other disgruntled Atari programmers, generating even more games for the console market such as Atlantis and Demon Attack. Yet by 1984, the video game industry was crashing amidst a glutted market and a lack of inspiration.

15 I admit to playing Pitfall and watching my character be chomped by hungry crocodiles as my hand-eye coordination failed miserably. I was also drawn to the possibilities of play/performance in such games.
As the 80’s progressed, the home computer began to take focus with Apple, Commodore 64, and Amiga leading the way. By 1984, the home computer was becoming a force in the electronics industry. With these companies poised to take computing into the home, the game industry found another avenue for exploration. The company Infocom presented a new adventure game called Zork and its two sequels to the world in late 1980. Drawing on Adventure, this new game was text-based and driven by narrative, completely different from the graphically focused games of Pitfall and Donkey Kong. This game encouraged interaction with the player. The computer asked questions and worked with the player to advance the game. As the Zork games were developing, a young man named Richard Garriott began creating a computer game based on his experience as a Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) player. The resulting software became Ultima, which has spawned several sequel versions as well as one of the major online gaming worlds. Ultima was among the first role-playing games (commonly referred to as RPGs) developed for the computer. Drawing inspiration from fantasy fiction and the character building process of D&D, the Ultima world was richly developed and its storylines continued to propagate popular sequels.

One of the major software companies to emerge at this time was Sierra. This pioneering company was among the first to develop a graphic adventure game, containing color-filled graphics while using sound and video cards, marketing the game on CD-ROM. Sierra published the long running King’s Quest adventure game series, and developed and refined the third-person adventure game genre. This genre allows the player to see the character being controlled from an over-the-shoulder perspective. This innovation placed more emphasis on environments and the ability to explore the world of
the story to a much greater degree than needed in more simplistic, action-driven games.

Another major software company to begin in the 80’s was Electronic Arts, also known as EA Games. This company was unique in their business practices, seeking to make cross-platform games (able to function on varying controlling devices) as well as devising stronger retail marketing strategies to survive the next evolution.

While the home computer had developed games specific to the abilities of the computer, video game companies had not been idle. In 1986, Americans were introduced to the Nintendo (Nintendo Entertainment System – NES) and to two games that revolutionized the industry once again – or rather, to two characters; Mario\(^\text{16}\) and Link. Mario, with a collection of titles that continues to grow, was a likeable plumber in a signature red cap who could run, jump, fly, and even take a ride on Yoshi, the friendly neighborhood dinosaur. The games developed for Mario were action-adventures, with the scrolling screen following the hapless hero across multiple landscapes. Link, an adventurer, is controlled by the player in a vast world seeking treasure to save the princess Zelda. This game is one of the first console role-playing games (RPG). The game system allows users to solve problems and to tackle various dungeons in the order they wish rather than in a predetermined sequence set by the game designers. Instead hours are spent roaming the various areas, killing creatures, and gathering treasure. Zelda culminates in a final battle between Link and the evil Ganon. This type of game was developed and pushed to the limits by another company, Square Soft, and its famous

\(^{16}\) Mario was originally introduced in 1981 in *Donkey Kong* and its sequels, but he didn’t become a ‘star’ until the mid to late 80’s with *Super Mario Brothers*. 
RPG series, *Final Fantasy*. With Link and Mario, Nintendo set the standards for the future explosion of games in the 1990’s.

The early 90’s saw the growth of Nintendo and the birth of the Sega Genesis consoles. Consoles and titles expanded quickly and some companies rapidly disappeared from the gaming landscape. By 1995, consoles had developed beyond the basic graphics capacity of 8-bit gaming. Among the leading consoles that had survived the initial changes in the market were the Super Nintendo, the Sega Saturn, and the Sony PlayStation. In 1996, Eidos software unleashed one of the most successful characters onto the game market and introduced an action-adventure game hybrid that would change the face of action games: *Tomb Raider*. The world was introduced to Lara Croft. The game pushed PlayStation to the top of the console heap and proved that three-dimensional worlds were the way of the future and that female protagonists were viable options in a male-dominated consumer game culture.

Alongside the development of the video game, computer games were developing at a rapid pace. In 1993, Broderbund released one of the most popular titles for home computers, *Myst*. This game was an interactive delight, playing to a sense of mystery and discovery while avoiding the normal game trappings of violence, monsters, and magic. The game is filled with puzzles, engaging the brain and the eye. With rich visuals, the game was compelling, non-violent, and addictive. Using the tag line ‘A surrealistic

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17 *Resident Evil* can be considered as a similar landmark much like *Tomb Raider*. Both were released in 1996 and both are considered benchmarks in the development of 32-bit, 3-D graphics. However, *Tomb Raider* is seen as the more influential of the two having generated such mainstream buzz as well as solely using a female protagonist. *Resident Evil* allows the player to select between either a male or a female character for the course of the game. Additionally, *Tomb Raider* is a more streamlined, conventional action game while *Resident Evil* is marked as part of the subgenre of horror games. Additionally, some gamers reference *Metal Gear Solid* as this type of landmark game, but its 1998 release date positions it firmly as an offspring of these titles.
adventure that will become your world,’ *Myst* and its sequels remain standards of
computer gaming. Also noteworthy, the soundtrack to the game achieved major success
as a separate entity, marking the importance of another team collaborator alongside the
visual artists and storyline writers.

In 1993 id Software developed a first-person shooter game called *DOOM*. This
game allowed the user to be in the game, shooting monsters and aliens while traversing
endless corridors and monster-filled rooms. The game was unique because players could
and did design levels to be played across land-area networks (LANs) or modems. With
the advent of *DOOM*, the internet was now available, allowing gamers to meet online to
blow away monsters or attack one another. *DOOM’s* success prompted the release of
*Quake*, another game with enhanced graphics and speed. Both games spawned several
other titles, which shaped the shooter genre, influencing the development and visual style
of later games.

Exploiting the tastes of American consumer culture, designers created simulation
games where the user built his/her own personal domain ranging from theme parks to
planets, from cities to civilizations. The leading software developer for such games was
and remains Maxis, the home of the simulation game. These games encompass every
possible avenue of strategic empire building from cities to farms to entire planets with the
prefix of ‘SIM’ in the title (i.e. *SIMCity, SIMFarm, SIMEarth*, SIM standing for
simulation). Under the guidance of Will Wright, Maxis has created a large number of
titles that remain popular and top competitors in the industry. The most recent addition to

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18 Rusel DeMaria and Johnny L. Wilson, *High Score! The Illustrated History of Electronic Games* (New
York: McGraw Hill, 2002) 275. *DOOM* was capable of hosting cooperative play between four players as
well as a death match mode that has remained popular in 1st person shooters.
the Maxis title list is *The SIMs*, a game that focuses on controlling individuals rather than entire societies.

In the mid-80s, Peter Molyneaux developed a new simulation game that created its own genre, god games. These simulations place the user into a virtual universe in which he/she is a god figure (hence the name of the genre) with ultimate control as well as interaction with the populace inside the simulation. Unlike simulation games which focus on mimicking a real world setting, god games place the player in the role of a god capable of watching worshippers on the surface of his/her world. Different from traditional simulations which range from piloting planes to running cities to leading armies, god games focus on developing the social infrastructure of a virtual world to support the player (god) in his/her endeavors. The god game began with Molyneaux’s *Populous* and later evolved into the popular games *Dungeon Keeper* and *Black and White*. In the controversial *Black and White*, the user trains a creature as the computer observes the user’s choices throughout the game. The creature then acts independently of the user-god and interacts with villagers, killing and maiming them, or opting to remain benevolent dependent on the player’s choices throughout the game.

The current crop of consoles includes the PlayStation 2, Nintendo GameCube, and Microsoft’s Xbox. Many game titles are now being developed for multiple consoles as well as for computers, both PC and Macintosh. Title libraries continue to grow as the games shift in focus and complexity. No longer is the simple *Pong* enough to satisfy the American palette.\(^{19}\) Instead, gamers seek rich graphic landscapes, innovative sound

\(^{19}\) This dissertation is focused on the American market and the American gaming titles. The gaming industry is much larger than simply North America. Many of the most successful U.S. releases, especially
scores, deep storylines, and intriguing characters. The video game evolution is an organic process, constantly shifting to reflect the tastes of the consumer. As the gaming industry has just passed its 40th anniversary, it is now time to recognize this emerging art form and place it within a critical context.

**Beauty and Technology: Theatre and the Computer**

The critical examination of the video game as a theatrical form has been limited to this point. Both the gaming industry and theatrical criticism have focused on different concerns. The gaming industry has established itself as a viable form of entertainment that will last beyond the novelty of new technology. Gaming has had to become a recognized power in the entertainment industry before being recognized as a unique form of personal expression worthy of merit. Within the industry, connections to theatre have been developed from a purely practical perspective rather than from an aesthetic standpoint. Game designers acknowledge this and have co-opted theatre theorists such as Aristotle to develop structural guidelines for linear game narratives but this awareness remains cursory at best. The game industry functions according to practical concerns dictated by working with technology for a commercial market. This limits the potential for aesthetic exploration of game structure and character development.

On the theatrical front, examinations of technology have focused on how performance is being altered and influenced by the growing media industry. Questions

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RPGs, come from Japan. Also, the American gaming industry is heavily influenced by the Japanese. Artwork, narrative, and technology advances all influence the development of games worldwide.

Computer games have been in development since the 1960’s, but the industry as a whole begins in the 70’s. I indicate the 40th anniversary as much of the press has focused on the first video game as the starting point of the industry rather than the actual development of hardware and software companies focused on gaming, which would suggest a 30-year history rather than a 40-year span.
concerning the nature of ‘liveness’, the role of the body, and the transformation of self are still being explored by scholars and performers in an attempt to examine how traditional theatre forms are changed and challenged by incorporating technology. Games have largely been dismissed from discussion due to their openly commercial, escapist image. In addition, the early forms of electronic games were unwieldy and problematic, focused on improving the technology, not the artistry. While the technology behind games continues to develop, the sheer size of the industry has demanded quality in product development, constantly raising the standards of design. To survive such a competitive market, games have become more interactive, more visually complex, and more driven by story and character. These recent developments make it possible for an examination of games through a theatrical lens.

From the 1970’s onward, theatre artists and scholars have sought to define the role of technology within performance, focusing on the computer and its relationship to theatre. In addition to Laurel’s work, several artists from theatre and other disciplines have speculated on the connections between technology and performance. Such speculation is twofold: first, understanding of the impact of technology on the performer’s body and second, the ways theatre is changing in relation to the digital generation. Both practical and scholarly works have made connections, resulting in several collective projects from the mid to late 1990’s that demonstrate some of the ways that theatre and computers have worked together.

One of the first educational theatrical initiatives was The Institute for the Exploration of Virtual Realities at the University of Kansas (I.E.V.R.), headed by designer Mark Reaney. Focused on the integration of virtual reality in performance, the
Department of Theatre and Film at the University of Kansas received several grants to outfit a black box performance space that allows spectators to see projected scenic elements and computer generated performers. Beginning in 1995 with a production of *The Adding Machine*, the Institute developed several works over the course of five years incorporating their new technology. In addition to presenting live works, the I.E.V.R. has also presented online performances. One of the landmarks of computers and theatre research, Reaney and his Institute proved that technology could make us consider theatrical space and the human form existing in a virtual realm.\(^{21}\)

Another key example linking computers and theatre occurred in 1990’s at Carnegie Mellon University. Known as The OZ Project and sponsored by the Computer Science Department, this project expanded Laurel’s ideas for an interactive drama and focused on creating technology to allow for better development of artificial intelligence (AI). With group members from Computer Science, Drama, and English departments, The OZ Project created microworlds for online interaction. Using real-time animation and traditional interactive fiction, the OZ project successfully began to question the creation of character in an online world.\(^{22}\) Visiting one of the online microworlds, a user could interact with a variety of characters driven by artificial intelligence. The experience centered on having the user choose what to do, what to say, and what to think at all times. This interactive approach was an attempt to improve the more typical, static

\(^{21}\) The I.E.V.R. Webpage, <http://www.ukans.edu/~mreaney/index.html>. 29 September 2002, There is no update on the page to ascertain how often Reaney changes content. The site contains links to the previous publications, research, and shows developed by the company but it has little information to indicate the current status of research and production.

\(^{22}\) The OZ Project Home Page. Carnegie Mellon University, 29 Sept 2002 <http://www-2.cs.cmu.edu/afs/cs/project/oz/web/oz.html>. No updated version posted. The OZ Project lists alumni as well as current project workers that have created project based off of previous work.
interactions where choices are pre-determined and limited in number. The study allowed
the researchers to examine how humans interact as online characters. This in turn
generated information concerning the creation of believable, dramatic agents by using
data constructs. The OZ Project spawned many other experiments such as The Virtual
Theatre Project at Stanford University (focusing on interactive, web-based drama for
children) and Façade, a real-time interactive online drama developed by Michael Mateas
and Andrew Stern.23 It also exerted considerable influence on the development of AI
technologies used in electronic games.

In 1994, the professional theatre company, The Builders Association, based in
New York City, began creating large-scale productions that embraced multimedia. Using
classic texts such as The Master Builder and Faust, the company focused on re-animating
theatre for contemporary audiences. Under the guidance of artistic director Marianne
Weems,24 the company explores new technologies while redefining collaborative process
to include animators, video artists, and web designers. There are other companies
working in multimedia such as Weems’s previous colleagues, The Wooster Group. The
Builders Association is somewhat unique in its strong commitment to multi-media for
every performance, creating time-consuming and media heavy projects. Their
commitment to creating multi-media theatre also draws heavily from popular culture,
referencing Music Television (MTV) with its signature VJ/DJ (video jockey/disc jockey)

23 Mateas is especially notable as he wrote a poetics of interactive drama which was first published online
and later included in Michael Mateas, “A Preliminary Poetics for Interactive Drama and Games,” Digital
Creativity 12.3 (2001): 140-52. I do not reference this article often in this study as I found his work to be a
reworking of Laurel’s original application of Aristotle that was not particularly useful in my approach to
structure and games.

24 Weems was a member of the Wooster Group from 1988-1994, serving as assistant director and
culture as well as embracing commercial forms of contemporary entertainment juxtaposed with more traditional theatre texts. Their most recent production, *Alladeen* (2003), is a large-scale cross-media performance developed in collaboration with British company motiroti. Combining electronic music, new video techniques, an architectural set, and live performance, the performance explores the myth of Alladeen, better known as Aladdin, the Arabian Night's tale immortalized on page, stage, and screen.²⁵ Developed as a theatrical performance, a music video, and a web experience, this work is representative of the company’s style and process utilizing multiple texts and multiple perspectives.

Another company of interest in the theatre and computers connection is The Plain Text Players. Based online since 1994 under the guidance of Antoinette LaFarge, this group of writers, playwrights, and performers, has produced a variety of online performances. Based on textual improvisation, these performances occur in cyberspace raising questions of presence, performance, and liveness. Using the tradition of oral storytelling, their original works have been recorded as transcripts. This particular company is unique in their continuing work, their most recent endeavor being *VIRTUAL LIVE*, a work presented on January 19, 2002, in response to the September 11 attacks. Blending live film from multiple performance spaces alongside a changing text window for the performers, it explored ideas of space, presence, and mediation. As described on their website, the work was politically motivated and grounded in textual elements rather than the more traditional spectacle of technology-driven theatre.²⁶ As an online-based

performance group, LaFarge and her collaborators are continually redefining the experience of theatre mediated by the web.

On an individual level, David Saltz, working with the Interactive Performance Laboratory at the University of Georgia, is continually producing work with motion capture technology, exploring the physical boundaries of performance. His production of *The Tempest* in April of 2000 utilized motion capture to create the character of Ariel. The landmark production was one of the first to explore the potentials of motion capture technology in relation to live performance. Having published multiple articles on the nature of interaction within performance, Saltz is one of the primary scholarly figures in developing a media aesthetic for theatre and computers. His work is mirrored and taken a step further by Claudio Pinhanez, whose work at MIT centered on computers and theatre. Focused on multimedia user experiences, Pinhanez has created new technologies that explore reactive technologies. These technologies allow real-time animation creations to respond to the live presence of a human body within an installation or performance space. The nature of response is determined by the programmer, responding to motion as the impetus for change. His work also includes computer characters interacting with humans such as in the work, *It/I*, pushing the theatre experience beyond the boundaries of traditional expectation.27

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27 Claudio Pinhanez, Claudio Pinhanez Research. 10 July 2002, IBM Research Site, 29 Sept 2002 <http://www.research.ibm.com/people/p/pinhanez/>. Although Pinhanez’s research was completed at MIT while working on his doctorate, this site connects to all Pinhanez’s various projects and publications. He is currently with IBM in their research division. As he is a computer scientist rather than theatre scholar, much of his published work is focused on the technical rather than the theoretical questions.
To record these works, the internet has become one of the main places to warehouse artifacts of digital performance. One of the first such online storage caches is the Online Digital Performance Archive hosted by the Nottingham Trent University and Media and the Performance Research Unit School of Media, Music, and Performance at the University of Salford, in Great Britain. The Digital Performance Archive holds descriptions, websites, and performance artifacts for technology-driven projects in theatre, dance, and visual art. The online collection covers the final decade of the 20th century, providing detailed information on productions and installations from 1990-2000. Works from all the companies previously mentioned can be found in the Archive.

Beyond the digital creation in live performance, more traditional written texts are becoming increasingly available. One of the most recent, Virtual Theatres: an Introduction (2004) by Gabriella Giannachi, explores the most current trends in blending theatre and technology referencing the cyborg performances of Stelarc and the hypertextual works by the British company Forced Entertainment. Dance surpasses theatre in scholarship with figures like Johannes Birringer (Contemporary Performance/Technology 1999) exploring questions of interaction, liveness, and technology. Allucquere Rosanne Stone (The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age 1998) and N. Katherine Hayles (How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics 1999) are major theorists exploring the idea of the body in cyberspace and the implications wrought by our transformations through technology. Lev Manovich (The Language of New Media 2001), a major media theorist, is continually attempting to understand media and its impact on the human animal. Yet none of these theorists or artists, with the exception of Laurel in
the early 80’s, focus on the electronic gaming industry as more than a perfunctory extension of the technological society of the present digital age.

**Structuring the Beast: Gaming Materials and Selection**

Beyond the published material provided by the theatrical world, the gaming industry is a primary source for this dissertation. Game theory and culture provides many insights into the nature of gaming and the gaming industry. Pulling from scholars such as Stephen Poole (*Trigger Happy* 2000), Henry Jenkins (*Hop on Pop* 2003), and Mark Pesce (*The Playful World: How Technology is Changing our Imagination* 2000), the nature of game playing is analyzed from the pop culture standpoint as well as examined in terms of the gaming/performance experience. These works allow for particular insight into the consumer/player perspective that drives the development of games. In addition to the general overview of gaming culture, much of the current writing on the impact of games is focused on two primary subject areas: violence and gender. Compilations like *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games* (1998), edited by Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins and *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game* (2004) edited by Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan, are considered as well as popular news articles that focus on the negative impact of gaming on modern youth.

Another primary source for information is game development and design. Titles such as *Game Design: The Art & Business of Creating Games* (2001) by Bob Bates and *Game Design: Theory and Practice* (2001) by Richard Rouse III as well as multiple publications from New Riders Inc. offer a rich store of information on the technical
aspects of design and some of the questions currently under discussion in the industry.\textsuperscript{28} Much of the current discussion about story and character creation exists online on industry websites. \textit{Gamasutra.com, The GameSpot, The Digiplay Initiative}, and others provide references to the practice and art of making games. The designers, providing insight into the process of development, often write these websites.

The commercial nature of the gaming industry yields numerous sites devoted to particular games and software companies. These sites, such as \textit{Playstation.com}, are filled with advertising, game reviews, and strategies for players. Although of little use in the critical understanding of the creative process, many of the sites are referenced as sources for support materials for the actual games. The home sites for major software companies such as SquareSoft, Electronic Arts, and Bullfrog serve to provide information for game play rather than design process, although some game sites do offer insight into the various designers alongside the latest tricks and tips for beating difficult levels of the game.

However, the main source for study and research is the games themselves. A wealth of titles is available and it is important to determine the type of game under consideration. For marketing purposes, games are often placed in genre groupings to allow for ease of identifying games with similar structures and playing techniques. Referencing games purely by genre is problematic as some games share elements making clear distinctions difficult. Yet, the genre label does indicate certain basic characteristics inherent in game style and structure. These genres are loosely defined in Appendix A in

\textsuperscript{28} There are also several titles on game programming but I have focused on those that cover design exclusively or that deal with the entire process of developing games, both technical and artistic perspectives.
table format. This table is a list of the various genre labels that are applied to games, creating a lengthy listing of categories. For each genre, I have provided a basic definition as well as some representative titles to aid in understanding the types of games. To maintain a focused examination, I have selected games that fall under the genre headings that are most strongly tied to theatrical conventions. I am most interested in games that use elements of role-play, creating characters and narratives that hold dramatic interest. Furthermore, I am interested in the latest stage of evolution focusing on games from the late 90’s to the present. Thus I will be focusing on role-playing (RPG), action (Mainly third person perspective), and massive multiplayer online role-playing (MMORPG) games.

The method of play – single player or multiplayer – is central to the analysis of games and theatre. Single player is self-explanatory, engaging a single player with a controller to play the game. Multi-player games, a development in the industry dependent on the Internet and the networking capabilities of computers, allow more than one player to join the action. Many games now feature both single player and multi-player modes of engagement. The nature of the multiplayer experience returns the social to what is often considered an antisocial self-absorbed experience. Multiplayer games vary in size and structure depending on the nature of the game. Online role-playing games (RPGs) present worlds with infinite interactive capabilities while online shooters are limited in storyline but can possibly generate infinite visual worlds when created by dedicated users.\(^{29}\) The contrast between multi-player and single player engagement

influences more than just the social engagement of playing the game. In most multi-
player environments, the worlds created are persistent, ongoing social structures that are
influenced and changed by the players while the single player game remains a more
static, traditional approach to storytelling.

The selection of computer and video games for this study include a wide survey
of existing titles. Classic games and series\textsuperscript{30} such as \textit{Final Fantasy}, \textit{Everquest}, and \textit{Tomb Raider} will be examined alongside more current titles in the industry. Games like
\textit{Primal}, \textit{The SIMs}, \textit{Neverwinter Nights}, \textit{Black & White}, and other current titles contrast these classics, suggesting changes occurring within game design. The majority of the
games released for computer contain multiplayer and single player modes while the
console titles are focused on the single player experience. Regardless, the collection of
games explored for this study provides a wide cross section of the three main genres of
interest.

\textbf{Connecting Beauty to Beast}

The work of media scholar Marshall McLuhan articulates how the concept of the
game holds a time-honored place in human tradition. Games are popular entertainments
that remain a consistent factor in social interaction altering form over time to reflect
changes in taste and technology. McLuhan positions games as follows: “Games are

\textsuperscript{30} These classic titles are considered series titles for a variety of reasons. \textit{Tomb Raider} has had several
direct sequels all involving Lara Croft, utilizing the game play style of the original game. \textit{Final Fantasy} is
currently up to \textit{Final Fantasy X-2}(2003) and \textit{Final Fantasy XI} (2003 for PC Version / 2004 for PS2
version). Although these games are not spin-offs or sequels in the traditional sense, the games are
considered part of a series for the continuity of game play as well as the visual style and overall quality of
the game. Finally, \textit{Everquest} has had several expansion packs released, which add content to the existing
virtual realm of Norrath.
popular art, collective, social reactions to the main drive or action of culture. Games, like institutions, are extensions of the social man and of the body politic, as technologies are extensions of the animal organism. Written in 1964, McLuhan’s dialectic for the media age positively placed gaming in the dramatic realm, reflecting the psychological life of the human animal. Electronic games represent the collective and embrace the tribal nature of the modern human as transformed by digital mediation. Particularly interesting in relation to video games, McLuhan locates the idea of the game opposite technology, connecting games to the social and technology to the corporeal. For McLuhan, games are extensions of the culture from which they emerge, directly reflecting the state of society. The split between technology and society appeared evident in the 60’s to McLuhan, while in the present, technology is married to society, continually present and constantly mediating our interactions and sense of the world. As games present the larger drama of the social world, the video game becomes the ideal place to position drama in modern society. The video game unites technology and play, connecting the physical animal to the social consciousness, directly reflecting the multimedia world.

Alongside the place of the game in media theory, the game must be positioned in the world of theatre. The nature of theatrical entertainment has been highly contested over time. When examined as popular entertainment, certain theatre has at times been characterized as low-art or as escapist entertainment. Video games suffer from the same derogatory arguments. Brooks McNamara, theatre historian and scholar, makes a strong case for including categories of popular entertainment under the wide umbrella of

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31 *Understanding Media*. 235. Taken from his chapter “Games: The Extension of Man”.

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The four types of popular entertainment identified by McNamara include: variety entertainment, popular theatre, entertainment environment, and optical and mechanical entertainment. For McNamara, popular entertainment is intimately connected to theatre, spawning new and different forms of performance. Likewise, the game world combines popular theatre and mechanical entertainment. Fantastic storylines draw heavily from the roots of melodrama, pitting evil versus good. The creation of interactive worlds is a direct descendent of McNamara’s ‘environmental entertainments’ in which he includes the circus, amusement parks, and wild west shows. Thus using McNamara’s work, it is evident that the video game can firmly be placed in the domain of theatrical performance, utilizing dramatic elements to create story, space, and performance.

Beyond McLuhan and McNamara, two other scholars have influenced my understanding of games and theatre. I have already discussed the importance of Brenda Laurel’s work and the significance of her book *Computers as Theatre*. She identified the potential dramatic nature of the computer in its capacity to shape the user experience and its capacity to represent human action. Having experienced the computer revolutions of games, multimedia, virtual reality, and the web, Laurel’s work continually pushes at the nature of the computer experience. *Utopian Entrepreneur* positions the world in a *transmedia* culture that assumes technology inhabits all aspects of life and art.

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33 84. Laurel’s transmedia culture predicts a time at which all media will work on all technical devices rather than being distinct to television, computer, cellular phone, etc. We are already beginning to see such convergence with the gaming industry as PlayStation2 and Xbox go online with their products, uniting stand alone consoles with the Internet.
The second influence on my research is Janet Murray, whose work explores the potential of the interactive story beyond Laurel’s initial ideas. Murray’s book, *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (2001), develops an aesthetic for digital interactive narrative. Murray takes her title from the television series *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and its holodeck in which users can program an environment that takes on the appearance of reality. This ‘reality’ is a complete sensory engagement, which translates into the concept of virtual reality. With its understanding of the submersive nature of digital narratives, Murray’s approach to the interactive potentials of cyberspace suggests a parallel to theatrical performance. She also coined the term *cyberdrama* in this work, enforcing the concept of digital narratives as innately dramatic, an evolution of traditional theatre. Her work provides a meeting point for performance and narrative in the virtual reality of games.

While Laurel and Murray have become standard references for the game industry there is one other scholar who has focused on the nature of the role-playing experience of a variety of entertainment forms from traditional *Dungeons & Dragons* paper format to online communities to amusement parks to virtual worlds. Kurt Lancaster, a student of McNamara’s, wrote *Warlocks and Warpdrive: Contemporary Fantasy Entertainments with Interactive and Virtual Environments* (1999) in which he examines the social nature of the fantasy role-playing experience. His exploration of role-playing conventions is important as a foundation for discerning ties between more traditional game forms and the electronic game. Together these scholars provide the theatrical, technological underpinning for this dissertation.
The Terms

Any discussion of electronic media inevitably encounters various terminologies outside the traditional theatre aesthetic. For this particular inquiry, the major terms I use to talk about the connection between games and theatre are: interactive, mediatized, virtual, presence, and performance. Each of these words has a particular history, context, and meaning. In articulating the background of these five words, they become a common vocabulary for use in my ensuing discussion.

First is the word interactive. The idea of ‘interactive’ is uniquely difficult. Raymond Williams, a major communications theorist of the mid-20th century, points to the interactive as being impossible to achieve. He places all things interactive into a category of reactive. Williams justifies this by stating that: “Nearly all equipment [primarily television] that is being currently developed is reactive; the range of choices, both in detail and in scope, is pre-set.”34 Yet Williams is located in the pre-computer era and he does predict a more interactive type of equipment as technology evolves. His interactive television is without explanation, more an idea out of science fiction than grounded in reality. More recently, media theorist Lev Manovich believes the term is too broad to use effectively since computers are interactive by their very design.35 Yet Manovich makes the connection to interactive as being both a physical and mental process, externalizing mind and body, to fill-in or connect gaps within both structures and ideas. In the ‘interactive’ state, the user is asked to identify with the designer’s mental

34 Television, Technology, and Cultural Form (Fontana, UK: Wm Collins Sons & Co, 1974) 139. Williams is noted here because of his historical importance and he presents some pieces for a possible definition.

state, in order to determine behavioral and structural openings and the patterns required to advance from moment to moment, page to page, event to event.\textsuperscript{36} Manovich’s notion of the interactive as a state of mind and body is vital in understanding how the electronic game connects to the user. The interactive is a major connective tissue between games and theatre. Games are a social experience that is sometimes limited by Williams’s preset choices and sometimes based in Manovich’s externalized mind. The discussion of the interactive becomes an evaluation of how the nature of gaming is changing by becoming more interactive. Current games attempt to bypass Williams’s limitations while furthering Manovich’s communicative, reactive state.

The second equally problematic word is \textit{mediatized}. This term must be placed in opposition to the term ‘live’ to be adequately defined. How can we determine the nature of the ‘live’ experience? Philip Auslander in his book \textit{Liveness} provides some answers. Live is continually placed in the context of being ‘real’ and therefore more credible. Yet Auslander finds little that is ‘live’ within modern culture. Instead, everything that is seen or heard is filtered through some form of media, hence \textit{mediatized}. Auslander does not address electronic games within his book, instead focusing on what he deems performance events (theatre, rock concerts, the legal system, etc.). For Auslander, everything is mediatized, becoming a product of mass media or media technology. For Auslander, the ‘live’ event is basically non-existent. Yet some of the factors that he presents as traditionally connected to understanding the ‘live’ concept are useful in relation to video games. Live seems interconnected with the ideas of immediacy and intimacy. In addition, the live event takes greater advantage of the senses. The ‘live’

\textsuperscript{36} \textit{The Language of New Media}, 57-61. Manovich also connects directly to Althusser’s ‘interpellation’ as a means of interpreting the interactive.
event creates community. All of these things can be tied to electronic games.

Nevertheless, the fact is inescapable: video games are mediatized. They are direct reflections and products of technology as well as being popular art/entertainment.37 As a result, although I will point to ways in which the gaming experience can fit more traditional definitions of the ‘live’ experience, the term ‘live’ ceases to function as a true descriptive, replaced instead by the word mediatized.

The third term, virtual is often considered the opposite of the real. To define this term, I turn to French theorist Pierre Levy and his Becoming Virtual: Reality in the Digital Age. Levy immediately makes the connection between the virtual and the actual rather than the virtual and the real. Instead of placing these two in direct opposition, Levy finds the virtual to be a different state of being. This state exists alongside ‘the real’, ‘the actual’, and ‘the possible.’ In the state of being known as the virtual, Levy places the human animal in a state of ‘becoming other.’ This state is not imaginary but instead filled with potential for change.38 The virtual is actually a state of complexity where all facets of the nature of a being are present prior to being evidenced in the actual. In a later work, Cyberculture, Levy posits that virtual has three meanings – one based in technology, one based in contemporary culture, and one based in philosophy. His virtual is connected to philosophy. “Any entity is virtual if it is ‘deterritorialized,’ capable of engendering several concrete manifestations at different times and places, without being

37 This is a broad summary of Auslander’s book, 1999. His connections to media make him the ideal theorist for this argument and his book connects with the theorists like Benjamin, Baudrillard, Sontag, and Phelan.

38 Pierre Levy, Becoming Virtual: Reality in a Digital Age, trans. Robert Bononno (New York: Plenum Trade, 1998) 15-34. The primary focus of this book is the process of virtualization but his Introduction and 1st chapter focus on defining the virtual.
attached to any particular place and time.” On a more basic level, the virtual is real in effect but not in fact. As with the more philosophical understanding, on this level, any entity can be virtual. This becomes particularly relevant in the exploration as space as well as the common use of the term in relation to the worlds constructed to house the games and the characters created within them. In more simplified terms, the virtual is a place lacking the boundaries of reality. Brenda Laurel explains this as follows:

"Reality has always been too small for the human imagination. [...] When a man considers how to climb a tree, imagination serves as a laboratory for ‘virtual’ experiments in physics, biomechanics, and physiology. In matters of justice, art, or philosophy, imagination is the laboratory of the spirit." Laurel’s virtual is a place of potential, much like Levy’s. In these virtual experiments a man uses the virtual, his imagination, as a place of testing and exploration. The virtual is the potential of the imagination, possibility that surpasses the real because it does not suffer from limitations imposed by the actual.

The fourth term is presence. If one is not live but mediatized, if one is virtual rather than actual, then how can one have the presence to interact? To establish some understanding of the embodied presence present in electronic culture, I have turned to Vivian Sobchack and her article “The Scene of the Screen: Envisioning Cinematic and Electronic ‘Presence’”. Sobchack posits that the electronic age has mediated our understanding of the world to the point of transforming ourselves. Evolving from a

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39 Becoming Virtual, 29.

40 Michael Heim, The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) 109-112. Levy would immediately take issue with this, substituting actual for real as in his understanding, the real is intertwined with the possible rather than the virtual. Heim is creating a basic definition here, accepting more popular culture understanding than the philosophical bent.

photographic culture where the idea of the real held primary importance, the emergence of the electronic culture has parsed our world into ‘bits.’ The physical world is reorganized and reinterpreted through mass media. Once mediatized, this representation of the world becomes a simulation in which everything is referenced intertextually. Historical consciousness and personal history are obliterated by the present instant and the focus of attention must be simulated rather than captured. Presence is dislocated from the physical flesh and becomes transitory. For Sobchack, this electronic presence lacks understanding and humanity, becoming a machine.42

The fifth and final term is performance. The term is admittedly broad and open. The foundation for classifying something as performative can be located in words or actions. Historically, J. L. Austin defines the performative as “the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action.”43 This places performance in a realm of words and utterances, unsuitable for electronic games, which often are silent actions. Instead, theatre theorist and anthropologist, Richard Schechner, provides an open definition that absorbs the electronic into the performative. In his latest textbook, Performance Studies: an Introduction, Schechner defines performances as follows: “Performances – of art, rituals, or ordinary life – are made of ‘twice-behaved behaviors,’ ‘restored behaviors,’ performed actions that people train to do, that they practice and rehearse.”44 Game playing parallels this definition of performance, based on repetitive behaviors in both the


44 22. This theory is also articulated in his earlier Between Theatre and Anthropology. I know this places the performance aspect in the anthropological but that seems a better fit with the physical component involved in performing as a gamer.
physical manipulation of joystick and keyboard. Additionally, the mechanics of game play dictate a repetition of behaviors and choices as players learn the particulars of various interfaces, learning what manipulations result in particular actions and what choices result in successful outcomes.

**Approaching the Question**

The goal of this dissertation is to place video and computer games into the realm of theatrical entertainment. To achieve such positioning, the games must be dissected using theatrical criticism, providing an aesthetic by which electronic games can be evaluated and understood. Once a common theatrical aesthetic is established, the game becomes a reference point for integrating theatre and technology beyond current expectations.

The following study is divided into five chapters. Each one deals with a different entry point into computer and video games using a certain theatrical perspective. The order for the chapters shadows the growth of the game industry. Initially, the interface determined the nature of the game. The second chapter titled, “Virtual Made Visible: Space in the Game,” focuses on the space of play. Modern society is driven by images and as such, the world of the game is created by establishing a visual and aural environment. The concept of space is perhaps the most problematic in relation to theatre as the game player is most often located in his/her living room as opposed to the communal, public space of a theatre. The physical relationship of performer to stage, player to game is examined using a spatial taxonomy developed by Gay McAuley in her work, *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre* (1999). In this assessment, the virtual world of the game is given a concrete parallel in traditional
theatre, exposing the similar nature of both while pointing out the difference implicit in the bodiless state of game play.

In chapter 3, “Aristotle & Beyond: Narrative Structures in the Game,” I examine the structure of game narrative. In order to do so, I utilize the work of three theatre theorists to illuminate the structure of three game genres. For third person action I use Aristotle and the game \textit{Tomb Raider}. For role-playing games (RPG) I use Bertolt Brecht and \textit{Final Fantasy \textsc{VII}}. I also include more recent titles such as \textit{Final Fantasy \textsc{X-2}} and \textit{Suikoden \textsc{III}} in this exploration of epic structures. For massive multi-player online role-playing, I use Augusto Boal and \textit{Everquest}. Structure is central to game design and analyzing game structures with these theatre figures results in the longest chapter in the work.

Chapter 4, “Questions of Character,” explores the construction of character within games. Using the method of dramatic character analysis as suggested by James Thomas in \textit{Script Analysis for Actors, Directors, and Designers} I examine various types of game characters in different genres. Games such as \textit{Primal}, \textit{Tomb Raider}, and \textit{Neverwinter Nights} provide an array of characters for analysis. The chapter finishes with a discussion of character in relation to empathy, focusing on the game \textit{Ico} as one of the few games that connects with players on an emotional level equivalent to traditional drama.

Chapter 5, “Melodrama Rewired: Myth, Monsters, and Madness,” illuminates the parallels between the nineteenth century American melodrama and the game while focusing on common issues of content. Using Daniel Gerould’s and David Grimstead’s discussions of melodrama, this theatrical form is tied to present video games. Religion and myth pervade the thematic tissue of gaming, creating the moral underpinning for
such epic battles between good and evil. The dramatic device of the quest emerges as one of the primary components of gaming stories. Young heroes, typically male, embark on journeys across massive realms in search of treasure and self-identity. Finally, the correlation to melodrama is reinforced by a discussion of spectacle in the game. Modern game design is contrasted with the early twentieth century theatrical design theory of Adolphe Appia, Edward Gordon Craig, and Robert Edmund Jones exploring the spectacle environment in relation to technology and realism. These virtual worlds are the equivalent of theatrical spectacle, serving as the backdrop and the enticement for the engagement in melodrama of the twenty-first century.

Finally, the dissertation examines the user experience in chapter 6, “Closing the Loop: Questions of the Spectator.” Augusto Boal states in *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, “this is theatre – the art of looking at ourselves.” Employing Janet Murray’s theories of interactive narrative, Boal’s concept of the ‘spect-actor’, and Richard Schechner’s definition of performance, this chapter examines the user experience. Games destroy the barrier between performer and audience. The act of playing is a theatrical exercise, which in turn creates a performance. Returning to the original problem of electronic games as theatrical, the chapter reveals potentials for the future as technology, games, and the definitions of performance continue to evolve. At journey’s end, the reader will recognize electronic games as inherently theatrical, focused on a live, non-repeatable experience.

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45 xxx. Boal explains the spect-actor term in the preface using the mythic tale of Xua-Xua’s discovery of self. The gamer experiences this discovery upon interacting with the game, freely exploring space and idea within the confines of the game.
CHAPTER 2

VIRTUAL MADE VISIBLE: PHYSICAL SPACE IN THE GAME

It is important to remember that the virtual world is no different than a theatre stage or a film set. Although we don’t use canvas and paint, we can learn much from the tried and true tricks handed down to us by 2000 years of theatre. Texture maps are our canvas sets and how we choose to use them will make or destroy the story we are trying to convey. Texture maps are not wallpaper, but our tool to trick the eye.¹

Don Carson, a game and theme park designer, eloquently expresses the interconnected nature of theatrical design as applied to environmental design. He speaks of creating space using the same tools as a theatre designer, but translated to a digital world. The environment of the game is a theatrical space, meticulously created by designers mirroring traditional practice. Geometric shapes define the playing area. Those shapes are given character by the texture maps that create the visual references of trees, rocks, monsters, etc. Lighting is added to provide a greater sense of realism and sounds finish the illusion to produce an environment that surrounds the player. The space of the electronic game is theatrical in nature from aesthetic and structural perspectives.

The Theatre and Space

Space is central to theatre. Throughout theatre history, sites of performance have been discussed, contested, and theorized. The performance spaces of Ancient Greece remain, thousands of years past the age of Sophocles, Euripides, and Aeschylus. Yet,

scholars such as Oliver Taplin, Ronald Vince, and David Wiles continue to theorize about the nature of Greek performance. Utilizing the remains of the physical space, alongside the writings of Aristotle and others from the period, scholars attempt to discern and clarify the manner in which performance occurred. The questions of how such spaces like the Theatre at Epidaurus and the Theatre of Dionysus were employed are highly debated. The use of space is intimately connected to the manner of performance and the nature of theatre. Other periods in history attract equal fervor from scholarly explorations of space. One of the most visible explorations of space is the reconstruction of Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre. The reconstructed Globe is a testament to scholarship and archeology, attempting to recreate the performance space of Elizabethan London in virtually the identical space as the original playhouse. The exercise in rebuilding the Globe according to its historical specifications has brought an understanding of how the theatre was performed in the Renaissance to a more immediate, visceral level.

Continually, the question of space is raised in relation to performance. Both historically and in relation to the live, changing shape of modern theatre, space remains a major means of signifying meaning within performance. Performance space can be defined as a live interaction between performers and audience that is contained in some physical shell that provides a frame of reference.

In the broadest sense, space is the creation of a three-dimensional frame through which we reference our geographic and temporal location. This three-dimensional frame is dynamic, using changes in geometric and temporal relationships to convey perceptual information. The human animal interprets this information with visual and aural modalities, creating an understanding of the physical world. Semantic meaning is layered
onto the physical understanding of space, attaching concept to actuality to convey deeper senses of meaning. Theatrically, the audience is aware of multiple layers of spatial concepts, opening multiple possibilities for connecting space to performance from structural to experiential to metaphorical meanings. Using a semiotics approach, Martin Esslin calls this “the infrastructure of ‘spaces’”\(^2\) evident in the stage picture. For example, when seeing a performance, the audience member is aware of multiple spatial sensibilities; the theatre building, the stage as a physical entity, and the illusory worlds presented within the performance. The defining of space by design elements is mainly iconic, creating a picture that explains the world of the dramatic action. Depending on how the audience member interprets these layers of spatial referents, the performance can be changed by the individual’s understanding of how these layers intertwine.

Theatre can exist anywhere that performers and spectators gather. Peter Brook in his celebrated work *The Empty Space*, states: “I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged.”\(^3\) Yet this reduction of performance to space, audience, and actor is a problematic notion in connecting theatre to the video game. If there is no literal space, can there be theatre? The physical space of the video game is virtual, created by a series of numbers and images. No longer grounded in the physical world, the game space is separate from the spectator, limited to a joystick and keyboard as the method of communication. Located in cyberspace, the player is connected by a series of electronic impulses conveyed over wires and cables to a

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\(^2\) *The Field of Drama* (Methuen: London, 1987) 72. This is reference to the basic sign system that Esslin feels is created by the designer – primarily scenic.

\(^3\) *The Empty Space* (New York: Atheneum, 1968) 9.
realm of numeric representation. The space of performance is transformed. The physical presence is marginalized and space becomes fluid. Reality is replaced by constructs of data that are assembled to create visible forms that represent displaced humans and realistic space. The game creates space in the form of a virtual world of sensory and thematic engagement.

**Cyberspace and the Virtual**

Before going further, the notion of cyberspace and virtual must be clarified in relation to this discussion. Cyberspace is a term that is intimately connected with the internet and the concept of global information systems. Originally coined in 1984 by science fiction author William Gibson in his novel *Neuromancer*[^4], this term has been romanticized, co-opted, and dissected by the computer industry and its connected culture of web surfers and hackers. Gibson’s poetic definition is as follows:

> Cyberspace. A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts. [...] A graphical representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the non-space of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding [...].[^5]

Gibson further describes the cyberspace domain as a world of “bodiless exultation”[^6] which has become synonymous with the world of the internet. In *Neuromancer* the world is wired together in a form of global communication. Makers of pop culture have long been fascinated by this interconnected world, often seeking to create a visual of the networked world of Gibson’s abstracted data.


The worlds of fiction, music, and film have each grappled with articulating and/or visualizing cyberspace, exploring possibilities within varieties of media. In Pete Townsend’s *Psycho Derelict*, a concept album developed in 1993 for a rock musical, cyberspace is called ‘the grid’ that people can connect to. Once connected, the user is safe from harm, able to dream his/her life, rejecting reality in favor of a program that holds no pain and no fear. With mainstream Hollywood films such as *Johnny Mnemonic*, *Lawnmower Man*, and *The Matrix*, the idea of cyberspace is continually being reexamined and visualized. The abstract world of the virtual provides limitless fodder for film, as each new incarnation of filmic cyberspace reinvents the visual icons of computer space. In 1995 films such as *Johnny Mnemonic* and *Hackers* presented cyberspace as a neon construct mimicking a continuous cityscape. Manipulated by darts of light that imitate pathways or roads, the data streams are represented as being contained in polygonal shapes, easily controlled by human users. By 1999, the vision of cyberspace shifted, becoming more ominous as represented in *The Matrix*. The perception of reality is controlled by computers; the world a simulation. Humans are no longer in control, physically or technologically. Instead, cyberspace is the facsimile of human reality creating a sensorial illusion virtually impossible to detect. Immersion in the construct of the cyber world is complete. Humanity is unaware of the difference between truth and representation. The visual of falling green numbers on a black screen represents the code of the matrix as machines control the world of humanity.

Although this film is an interpretation of Gibson’s novel, it is not considered an adequate representation of the text. Instead, it is viewed as a hackneyed interpretation that was developed by and for the mainstream by Hollywood.
More recently, theorist Pierre Levy provides a less poetic but more concrete definition of cyberspace:

Cyberspace (also known as the ‘network’) is the new medium of communications that arose through the global interconnection of computers. This term refers not only to the material infrastructure of digital communications but to the cosmic universe of information it holds, as well as the human beings who navigate and nourish that infrastructure.”

Levy’s definition is not simply the imagined hallucination of William Gibson’s fictional world, but the actual realization of global communication in the modern world. Now a broad reference term, cyberspace is embedded in popular culture as a dramatic and potentially dangerous realm of possibility that exists removed from the physical world of the senses. Cyberspace is a world of opportunity that functions as a secondary reality outside the physical, sensory boundaries of humanity; a virtual world.

Note that it would be both erroneous and premature to assume that virtual is the opposite of real. Instead, the term virtual places significance on the concept of potential rather than actuality. As mentioned earlier, Brenda Laurel equates the virtual with imagination, a place where ideas can be tested without the boundaries of reality. In more complex terms, computer scholar Jesper Tække provides another definition of the virtual:

A virtual object is not a copy as a sign is not a copy, virtuality is a non-material matrix to form signs in words or pictures. It is a substance or medium we can sculpture in to suggest meaning in society. Virtuality is not a language but a medium whereby we can muddle when creating language like the physicality is (the air is a physical and localized medium for oral sounds used in talking). In cyberspace virtuality provides a non-material matrix for externalizing human potential in art, calculations, games, and in direct communication.

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This approach to virtual expands the experience of the electronic into a new medium capable of representing human experience. Rather than seeing the virtual as non-real, the virtual becomes another medium of expression that is not limited by the boundaries of the physical world, a place in which ideas can take a variety of forms. The real is not forgotten in this medium. Instead, the real provides the referent for much of the visual, aural, and language communication that occurs. The real becomes the foundation of the virtual as human potential is expanded by the removal of physical limitations.

The medium of the virtual is linked to gaming as a performance space in which the possible and impossible can believably coexist. The virtual is the point at which reality becomes mutable and visions can become actuality. Consider the virtual as the apex of a triangular relationship between reality and illusion. The virtual makes illusion visible; accessible to the individual and the collective within cyberspace. Figure 2.1 suggests this relationship in a graphic manner. Within this realm, the representation of

Figure 2.1: A graphic representation of the relationship between the virtual, the real, and illusion.
physical space allows a visual and aural simulation state that provides spectators and participants with a sense of space that exists parallel to the material, physical world. That simulation is not a physical construct; instead, it is “a medium using signs and producing meanings, it is a semiotic configuration where you can get information about the world and about imagined worlds.” The gaming experience capitalizes on multiple variations of virtuality, sometimes located in true cyberspace, sometimes in simulations, drawing gamers into an experience that has theatrical components. The video game is a virtual space, a place of possibility. The world of *Nightmare Creatures* is predefined by the designers with a limited exploration open to the player. The virtual space is created and constrained by the game designers and programmers, developing a virtual world that exists only within the confines of the screen and the imagination. The player is allowed to roam this virtual space, confined by the virtual borders of the game. The illusion of a physical space is created by a series of coordinates that hold information. The placement and manipulation of geometry in virtual space is much like a theatre flat is placed in relation to a ground plan. With the mathematical coordinates, the game places shapes and textures in relation to the player’s viewpoint. This world is then contained on the game disc, limited by the hardware of the console. In opposition to this, the world of cyberspace, accessible by the internet, is less limited. Many computer games access cyberspace to become massive multiplayer worlds, functioning in the virtual realm with no physical limitation. When playing *Everquest*, the individual can roam a seemingly

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11 The limitation comes with the server space that hosts the game and the content generated by the game design team and/or game players.
endless world that is continually changing, shaped by the players and designers in a real-time experience. Regardless, the electronic game uses virtual space as the medium to express dramatic action. No longer focused on creating a momentary flash of excitement, games have become experiential, creating worlds that are driven by dramatic concepts and fleshed by spatial representations.

**Onstage with a Joystick: The Mechanics of Space**

The gamer enters a virtual world in the playing of a video game. The interactive space of game play is a visual and aural world that exists parallel to the physical space in which the individual plays. Games create realities of fantasy and science fiction, allowing illusion and reality to meet. Driven by the ideas of imagination but developed by the rules of physical reality, the world of games is a virtual space, present outside the real in a non-material space. To dissect the space of the game as a theatrical construct, it is necessary to first define theatrical space.

To begin to explain the spatial relations within games as connected to theatre, a distinction must be made concerning how space will be referred to throughout this chapter. To that end, Australian performance scholar Gay McAuley provides a taxonomy of spatial function in the theatre that serves as a frame for the following discussion of space. McAuley synthesizes previous theoretical approaches to theatrical space, creating an interlaced conceptual approach to the delineation of space in relation to performance. Using familiar terms that acknowledge their background and history, McAuley creates a categorization of space inherent in theatrical use that can be adopted by the electronic game. Combining semiotic theory and architectural principle, McAuley develops five major areas of theatrical space: ‘Social Reality’, ‘Physical/Fictional Relationship’,
‘Location and Fiction’, ‘Textual Space’, and ‘Thematic Space’. For the purposes of this discussion, the first three areas hold great interest while the issues of textual and thematic space will be treated in more detail in later chapters.

The Social Reality

McAuley begins the dissection of space with its largest frame, ‘Social Reality’. This broad term encompasses the real world, from the physical building of the theatre to the actual rooms within the building. The actual theatre space is further broken down into components that are categorized by use groups: ‘Audience Space’, ‘Performance Space’, and ‘Practitioner Space’. Additionally, McAuley places ‘Rehearsal Space’ into a separate but connected grouping, linked to the performers and practitioner while remaining out of the domain of the audience. The relationship between these spaces is fluid, allowing for overlap between use groups as necessitated by different types of performance. The delineation can be visualized as seen in Figure 2.2. For McAuley, the ‘Audience Space’ is connected to the spectator, focusing on accessible social spaces as well as entry points to the building. ‘Practitioner Space’ is linked to the performers, designers, directors, etc.; McAuley also references the ‘Practitioner Space’ as backstage space drawing from the traditional use of the term. The ‘Performance Space’ is where the two previous areas overlap, allowing audience and performer access to one another. Finally, McAuley addresses the ‘Rehearsal Space’ as a fourth area of the ‘Social Reality’ due to the impact of such space on performance. Also, McAuley points to the ‘Rehearsal Space’ as having a unique atmosphere distinct from the more casual, social relationship

The Theatre

Audience Space

Performance Space

Practitioner Space

Rehearsal Space

The Social Reality

Theatre Space

Figure 2.2: A graphic representation of McAuley’s outline of ‘Social Reality’

of the ‘Practitioner Space’. The relationship between these spheres of ‘Social Reality’ will provide a first point of examination for the dissection of space within the electronic game. Following McAuley’s lead, this discussion begins with the larger world surrounding the game experience as connecting to the ‘Audience Space’.

**Audience Space**

The physical space for gaming has undergone an evolution over its forty-year history. Although the preferred location for gaming has always been the comfort of the home, in the 1970’s and 1980’s, the ‘Social Reality’ for gaming occurred in social arenas such as bars and pizza parlors with the initial fad of arcade style games. The video game market was heavily focused on the social nature of the game. In a bar, the arcade game created a ‘Performance Space’ in which bar patrons could fluidly move between being

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13 *Space in Performance*, 24-27.
performer and spectator, opting to play or not to play. The public spaces had the latest
games and the ‘hottest’ technology, able to afford the high costs of arcade games. With
the development of better home consoles and home computer systems, the physical
location shifted from public space to private space, migrating to the living room. As
games have become longer in playing duration and more complex in storyline, the
comfort of one’s living room was preferred to more crowded arcade and bar locations.
Hence, the ‘Social Reality’ for the gamer is different from the theatre spectator, most
often being a private space. The home is the physical location for the majority of gamers.
Within the home, the physical space is determined by the placement of the computer
and/or television screen, often located in the family room or other personal space within
the home. This results in most gaming spaces being private, comfortable areas in which
the gamer is free to indulge in play for many hours at time.

More specifically, the manner in which a gamer elects to play the game
determines the nature of the ‘Social Reality’. The nature of gaming is continually
evolving, shifting the nature of play and the manner in which players interact with the
game space as well as other players. For example, the single gamer who uses a
traditional video game console such as a Nintendo GameCube, PlayStation 2, or X-Box
encounters a semblance of virtual environments that engage the single player with an
analog controller. The player is traditionally solitary in nature, viewing the game on a
two-dimensional flat screen with interaction being limited to the individual and the
console hardware. Within these games, characters are created by artificial intelligence,
limited in responses, existing and operating in a pre-determined world. However, the
console video games can support more than one player as long as the players are in the
same physical location. Every gaming console is equipped with two controllers, allowing team play or one-on-one interaction with two gamers. In fighting games such as *Mortal Kombat* and *Tekken*, the two players can opt for playing in interactive battles with each other rather than fighting a computer controlled character. Currently, the development of game consoles has allowed for the addition of other players using hardware pieces that accommodate multiple controllers. This type of play is most often seen in games that are driven by sporting activities such as football, basketball, or racecar driving. In either the two or the multiple configurations, the game experience becomes a physical, social encounter as two or more individuals sit in close proximity to engage in gaming.

Opposed to the video game, the computer game has the potential for larger scale interactions not limited by physical surroundings. The single gamer who uses a computer, either Macintosh or PC platform, engages with the game using a variety of controllers from keyboard to mouse to joystick. The player can also select games that mimic the console environment with game play interaction limited to the individual and the computer such as *Alice, Tomb Raider, SimCity*, etc. In these games, the player is located to a game world that is pre-determined and characters are driven by artificial intelligence.

The other option open to the computer game player is to play a game that has a multi-player option. In selecting to play in this manner, the gamer goes online to play the game within a virtual world. In this realm of possibility, the gamer interacts with multiple characters that are played by other individuals in different locations. Games such as *Everquest, Ultima Online, Warcraft III*, and *The Sims Online* welcome players into a common online space that houses the world of the game in which the player
interacts. Individuals in this environment seek interaction and communicate via typed
text to ask questions, gain information, and socialize. These virtual worlds have evolved
from being textual environments to fully developed artistic realizations of environments
that mimic the spatial relations of physical reality. Currently, video games are attempting
to make the leap into cyberspace as Xbox and PlayStation 2 add online components to
their existing consoles. With games such as *Final Fantasy XI, Everquest*, and several
sports titles, the console gamer will soon be able to play games in cyberspace.

Beyond the connections to cyberspace, gaming is not physically limited to the
home. Outside the private space of the living room, competitions and social arenas allow
for other opportunities where individuals will transport computers to a single location to
play in LAN tournaments.¹⁴ Players join in a communal location to play several different
computer games such as *Doom, Quake, Warcraft*, and others. These tournaments can
serve a large number of gamers, allowing hundreds of players the opportunity to gather in
a single physical location, creating a social dynamic that disrupts the myth of gaming as a
purely solitary entertainment. This circumstance provides a direct reflection of ‘Social
Reality’ as competitors gather to play in a single room, sometimes watched by curious
spectators. Here, the distinctions of ‘Audience Space’ reflect the historical roots of social
arcade gaming in which the players are publicly engaged before the eyes of spectators.

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¹⁴ LAN tournaments – LAN stands for a Local Area Network in which multiple computers are linked
together in a single physical space to allow multiple users to play a single game. The benefit for this type
of multi-player gaming is a control over who is connecting to the game as all are physically in the same
location rather than online where there is no control over who joins the game. This is most common with
games such as *Quake* and *Doom* which were designed for LAN play as well as online, modem play. These
tournaments are often held on college campuses with a small fee for attendance while providing a more
competitive, social arena for players.
In an additional parallel, the entry into game space mirrors the experience of attending the theatre. The theatergoer purchases a ticket to the performance; the gamer purchases the software to play the game. The theatergoer enters the space through a doorway, while the player enters the game through a server. The theatre audience generally responds to the performance in an established manner, most noticeably applause at the act break and final curtain. For the gamer, response in the game is based on keyboard strokes and textual exchanges or the manipulation of a joystick. The player is indoctrinated into a world where a shorthand style of communication allows players to hit various keys that convey appropriate messages to other players or to cause certain behaviors in the onscreen characters. For example in the game *Everquest* to gain the attention of another player in the same area, the key strokes are as follows: `/shout <text>`, allowing the text to be visible to all the players in the zone of play. This is similar to yelling at someone across the room in the real world. In contrast, if the player is only interested in speaking to his/her current traveling companions (like whispering to a group of friends), the text is as follows: `/gsay <text>`. The resulting message is only available to the group and keeps communication private aiding in accomplishing missions.

Additionally, the player can use commands to trigger some actions within the onscreen avatar indicating mood and furthering the sense of playing a character. Characters can be

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15 Servers are gateways to virtual online communities. A server is a digital support system that holds the information of the game, allowing the player to ‘enter’ the game world by accessing the server. In some cases, the player’s information about his/her character and the history of his/her actions and quests is stored online on a dedicated game server to maintain consistency. In some games, various servers have specific rules that effect game play in relation to level of characters, which races attack one another on sight, how team play is structured, etc. These rules impact the player experience and the selection of server can be compared to the experience of seeing a production in a different physical space. I.e. Seeing *Tartuffe* in thrust space will differ to seeing the same production in a proscenium space – the story remains the same but the physical orientation is substantially different. With selecting a server to play *Everquest*, the community of Norrath still operates as suggested in the handbook, but the player’s experience will be quite different depending on the rules of the particular server.
commanded to sit, dance, or bow by the player upon entering the command for the action.

In console games, the twitch of a joystick causes the avatar to fight, cast spells, or converse with other onscreen characters. The animations, created by the designers, are constructed to provide a sense of realism within the game as well as options for the player to consider the character in a physical sense rather than limited to a textual exchange.

This constructed world of servers, joysticks, and keyboards is explained in detail in the handbook that accompanies the software. The player must be aware of this construct to play the game and implicitly agrees to the structural rules by entering the game world.

**Practitioner Space**

Beyond the ‘Audience Space’, the ‘Social Reality’ of the ‘Practitioner Space’ is difficult to locate within the game. This space is not a physical location such as the living room, but is instead located to the game creation team, accessible, in some cases through separate interfaces that allow player interference and/or contribution. The manifestation of a game on computer or television screen is a process of reading coordinates in space, matching those coordinates to visual images, and overlaying the two components to create a simulation of a visually and aurally defined space. This system is created by the game design team, visualized by game creators and actualized by programmers. This space is inaccessible to the audience/player. The pathways of code are the backstage of the game. The code is the domain of the game programmers and designers. This domain of numeric references, image files, and audio clips is moderated by the computer software in much the same way that a stage manager controls the domain of the theatre. The computer utilizes the guidelines created by the software development team to propel the game forward in response to the audience. The artificial intelligence of the game
monitors the game and triggers events within sequence, calling the cues of the scene. This interconnected web of data is hidden from the gamer much as the workings of the stage were originally hidden from the audience.

In relation to theatre, Bertolt Brecht can be identified as the dramatist primarily responsible for revealing the machinery of the theatre to the audience. Driven by a fascination with the visceral nature of popular sporting events such as boxing, his methods for exposing the workings of the theatre are as follows:

> It’s more important nowadays for the set to tell the spectator he’s in a theatre than to tell him that he’s in, say, Aulis. The theatre must acquire qua theatre the same fascinating reality as a sporting arena during a boxing match. The best thing is to show the machinery, the ropes and the flies. [...] The materials of the set must be visible. A play can be performed in pasteboard only, or in pasteboard and wood, or in canvas, and so on; but there mustn’t be any faking.  

For Brecht, the stage space needed to be an obvious meld of ‘Performance’ and ‘Practitioner’ space to be engaging for a modern audience. Rather than tricking the audience to believe in a false reality, the goal was to provide a space that fit the needs of the narrative while allowing the audience to remain cognizant of their connection to the greater ‘Social Reality’. By revealing the trappings of the ‘Practitioner Space’ to the audience, the performance stands a greater chance of successfully engaging the audience as both entertainment and instruction.

Within the gaming community, the ‘Practitioner Space’ has been made accessible for similar reasons, creating a stronger sense of engagement and connection. The codes of game design are often posted online as ‘cheats’ for those interested, allowing players to gain access to hidden levels, extra powers, or unique items/weapons within a game.
The gamer gains access to the hidden code of the game only by using special knowledge becoming aware of how the game operates and functions. These cheat codes turn the player into an omnipotent being, able to bypass normal game behaviors such as leveling up or finding weapons. With such abilities, the player is able to join the game from a more informed position, much like the developers.

Opening a connection to ‘Practitioner Space’ is escalating as an industry practice, as gamers seek to make games more unique to the individual player. With games such as Neverwinter Nights and Dark Cloud, the gamer can manipulate the world of the game to reflect their interpretation of the narrative. Allowed to control the visual and aural sensibilities of the game, the game player becomes a designer. To do so, the player must enter a special area of the game, the ‘Practitioner Space’, leaving the game itself and entering its ‘backstage’. Neverwinter Nights uses a Toolset designation for this area of the game. The use of this option allows the gamer to become designer under the established guidelines created by the original design team. The screen appears different from the gaming screen, removing the player from the world of the game, placing the individual firmly in a designer capacity. This shifting of roles between gamer and designer is more easily accomplished in the realm of the computer game. Within the video game, games for consoles, such as Dark Cloud for the PlayStation 2, allow users to revisit levels, reconfiguring the visual world to suit individual tastes. Transformation options are more limited than in the computer environment, but the connection to the ‘Practitioner Space’ remains similar. As the player gains experience in Dark Cloud the options available for altering the construction of the world increase, encouraging the gamer to spend hours accumulating the various items and wealth necessary to achieve
his/her personal vision. Begun with games like the *Quake* franchise, the ability to engage in the design aspect of the game is becoming a stronger factor in the popularity of games. As the technology allows for more novice interaction in the ‘Practitioner Space’, the degree of involvement for the player in designing levels and quests will continue to increase, becoming more integrated into game designs. The most recent developments place the creative potentials in the hands of the less technologically inclined, using graphic interfaces to allow those who are less able to write in computer code an opportunity to become artistically engaged in the design process. In games like *The Sims*, the player begins the game in a design space, creating the characters that will live in the simulated environment. The player has the option of selecting from a pre-designed group of choices for skin color, physical shape, hair color, clothing, etcetera, simulating the casting process. Yet, if the player wishes to be more creative, the interface allows a player with no computer programming knowledge to import drawings or photographs to serve as the texture map for the character. In this manner, the player becomes the designer of the game, using personal taste to dictate the appearance of the characters and the surrounding environment without having to know technical specifications or other such practitioner details.

**Performance Space**

With the ‘Audience Space’ defined as the physical location of the player and the ‘Practitioner Space’ exposed and open to the player, the ‘Performance Space’ melds these two into the visualized screen world of the game. The performance occurs onscreen, driven by the gamer following the rules of the designers. The confluence of spectator and performer will be discussed in detail in Chapter 5, but for the purpose of this argument,
the game player is both spectator and performer. The ‘Audience Space’ is physically tied to the location of the game in the home; yet, the ‘Performance Space’ becomes a blending of imagination and code as the gamer gains control of the character that he/she portrays in the game. Although a true spectator can exist (watching others play the games, never touching a controller), the gamer both watches and plays the game simultaneously. The ‘Performance Space’ is removed from the ‘Audience Space’.

Architecturally, the use of the screen as a physical focal point mimics the stage space, creating a proscenium arrangement. As the player controls the onscreen persona via controller, the resulting actions are presented on the screen, removed from the physical body of the player. The monitor or television screen frames the visual space of the game. Within the initial frame, the game expands the visual parameters of space using camera angles to achieve a rotation of vision controlled by the player. Shifting visual perspective from third person, first person, and bird’s eye vantage points, the player gains a freedom of visual expanse. Comparisons between thrust, arena, and proscenium arrangements can be easily made as the player controls the onscreen camera.

Originally serving as audience, the player enters the ‘Performance Space’ through a series of interfaces, maneuvering through multiple introductory screens before joining the game as actor. This path of entry is a conscious decision on the part of the gamer. Generally, the game begins with some sort of introductory film, serving as a theatrical prologue to allow the spectator to see the storyline. The spectator then either selects the character he/she wishes to play or is introduced to the character that serves as the focus of the action. By accepting or selecting that character, the gamer becomes the performer, linked to the role that he/she has chosen. Having taken on that role or character, the
gamer is in the ‘Performance Space’. This space is easily exited or paused as the whims of the gamer dictate, but once the game begins, the computer controls the game world while the player controls his/her character. This dynamic mirrors the theatrical relationship between technician and performer in production: the actor controls his/her character while the stagehands and board operators manipulate the physical environment.

Within the ‘Performance Space’, the interaction of the player with other entities is determined by multiple factors. The player can be limited to artificial characters driven by pre-determined scripts, as in RPG games like *Final Fantasy* series. In this type of interaction, the player assumes control of a main character. That character interacts with other characters in a fixed order revealed over time driven by the established narrative. In other types of games, such as the *Everquest* series, the player can interact with multiple characters driven by other players over internet or LAN connections. The player creates a character using a set of parameters such as gender, race, stamina, etc. and then participates in various scenarios with other characters created by other players. The world of the game is in cyberspace and is functioning in a real-time interaction between players. In either case, the offstage space in these games is limited to screens, which show character statistics and allow the player to modify the character. In most games, this screen shows a list of available options from costume choices to weapons to items. The character is held in limbo as these changes are made, providing a removal from the action of the moment similar to being removed from the playing space. As the scope of the game stories span days and months of time, characters can also opt for rest breaks that pass time. These breaks are short in real-time but simulate longer periods so characters may rest and heal as well as allow narrative developments to occur.
The sense of ‘Performance Space’ is most effectively explored in the online multi-player games such as the *Everquest* series, in which characters are played by multiple individuals in various physical locations around the world. Upon entering the game or the ‘Performance Space’, the player is in character interacting with other characters, continually aware of being onstage, in character. The game requires joining with others to advance, and to join the player must interact. No offstage space is utilized. To be welcomed into a group, the player must understand the nature of the character as well as which other players might be receptive to being approached. The player is aware of the ‘Performance Space’ as the choice to enter is conscious. Once entered, the ‘Performance Space’ functions as a stage on which the player can perform as well as observe other characters in action. The gamer retains an awareness of the ‘Audience Space’ as a physical presence, in contrast with the visual world of the performance stage, while the practitioner stage remains cloaked unless directly manipulated by the performer.

The ‘Performance Space’ is also defined in large part by the game designer’s choice of visual perspective. The player assumes a character, but the designer decides how the spatial world of this character is portrayed.\(^\text{17}\) In other words, the designer determines the point of view for the player. In the first-person perspective, the game is viewed through the character’s eyes. This is an egocentric, body-centered perspective that connects the player into a physical sensibility. In games such as *Half-Life*, the first person perspective is employed. The range of visual information is determined by the

\(^{17}\) Marc Saltzman, *Game Design: Secrets of the Sages*, 2\(^{\text{nd}}\) ed. (New York: Brady, 2000) 1-9. This point is taken from a longer discussion on the aspects of player perspective.
character’s relationship to the space and the aural environment is generally a stereo image
treatment that helps perpetuate the sense of immersion. Shooter games such as *Quake*
and *Doom* use this viewpoint to create greater tension while several combat and flight
simulators use this perspective to achieve a greater sense of realism in the simulation.
The third-person perspective places the player in an ‘over-the-shoulder’ viewpoint. This
is one of the more popular viewpoints for games as the player is immersed in the game
environment but has a wider field of vision, which allows him/her to see the moves the
selected character is making. Games such as *Tomb Raider* and *Resident Evil* employ this
style in creating their action adventures. Lara Croft is seen battling her way across a
temple in this perspective as if by a camera directly positioned behind the character.
Rather than being limited to the character’s view, the player sees his/her character in the
screen. A top-down perspective can also be employed for some games (such as *SimCity*)
providing a flat reference. This type of viewpoint has been modified in several games to
allow for an isometric perspective, giving a three-quarter view to the player, as seen in
*Dungeon Keeper 2* and *The Sims*. Some games alternate these perspectives depending on
the nature of the dramatic action, varying the perspective of the ‘Performance Space’ to
maintain player interest in both visual information and experience; acknowledging the
player’s role as both audience and actor.

**Rehearsal Space**

McAuley’s ‘Rehearsal Space’ is also represented in some video games. As the
controls for games become more complex, the use of a training area has become more
common. This addition also helps to clarify when the player enters the ‘Performance
Space’ as opposed to a ‘Rehearsal Space’. The initial release of *Tomb Raider* was the
game most effective in creating this unique sense of rehearsal. To prepare for Lara Croft’s tomb raiding adventures, the player is invited to visit Lara’s home for training. The atmosphere in this game environment is substantially different from the actual performance area. As the player explores the mansion in the character of Lara Croft, the game uses audio cues to explain the different moves of the game. Much like a director, the game guides the player in the motions and controls necessary to make Lara function in the ‘Performance Space’ where no such help will be provided. This tutorial section is a rehearsal for the ‘real’ performance where experience points, injuries, and other such rules of the game are explained but hold no penalty. In this ‘Rehearsal Space’, the player is trained for the rigors of the game, thus removing the apprehension of performance. Several titles now use this technique, training players before they begin playing to provide a level of confidence necessary to enter fully into the nature of the game.

**The Physical / Fictional Relationship**

The second area of classifying space in Gay McAuley’s taxonomy revolves around the physical reality / fictional place duality. The relationship that concerns McAuley in this area is the relationship between the awareness of the physical theatre and the manufactured other world of the play that exists onstage. To adequately express this relationship, McAuley uses three distinctions of space: *Stage space*, *Presentational space*, and *Fictional place*. The stage space is the physical stage itself, created by the architecture of the building to form a space for performance. Presentational space is McAuley’s attempt to split the world of the play from its physical representation onstage to the transformation that occurs when performers are added to a bare stage.

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presentational space is created by the presence of actors and their movements onstage. For McAuley, the presence created by the addition of objects on a static stage is separate from the fictional place that is expressed onstage by visual design elements.¹⁹

The physical stage of the game is controlled by the screen in which the player is viewing the game. Screen resolution and pixilation transform the computer game image while television screen size and quality change the nature of the video game image. In either case, the size of the screen alters the gamer’s perception of the visual world. Additionally, the placement of speakers within the room alters how the aural world is created and maintained within the frame of the game. The player controls some degree of this physical stage by determining the placement of the ‘Audience Space’ in relation to the screen. The relationship of the physical body to the screen can have a direct impact on the level of engagement with the game as physical comfort, visual accuracy, and audibility can all be changed easily as opposed to the physical stage space of a theatre, which is limited architecturally.

The presentational space mentioned by McAuley is relatively non-existent in the game situation. The player is either in the game ‘Performance Space’ or in another specific area such as the ‘Rehearsal Space’ or ‘Practitioner Space.’ The bare stage is not applicable to modern game space. Instead, games immediately focus on the fictional space, creating an immersive sensory environment for the player. Potentially, the earlier model video games such as *Space Invaders* and *Pong!* might be considered bare stages as the development of graphics had not accelerated to the current level of artistic

¹⁹ 29. McAuley does not reference the aural world in this discussion but I will include it as being a part of creating the fictional world. It is important to recognize the sensory input necessary to create a full picture of a fictional world.
capability. The initial engagement of a dark screen with only tiny white blips as reference points held the potential for the later generations of games, yet there was no sense of character to mirror McAuley’s physical presences. The original online role-playing games might also be seen as presentational space in which a blinking cursor beside a character name indicates a presence in cyberspace prior to engaging the fictional story. Some text-based RPG games still function in this manner; for example, *Perilous Realms* is a role-playing environment that operates on the rules of the world of Middle Earth as created by J. R. Tolkein in his *Lord of the Rings* cycle. In this static world, the only development is lines of text, describing action and character in line after line of abbreviated script. Here, a blinking cursor holds the sense of presence but remains an imperfect match to the concept of presentational space.

As a variation of presentational space and the onstage/offstage sensibility, it is important to realize that the visual treatment of space within the game locates the player in some of these relationships. The use of screen space in the game-world creates an offstage/onstage split as the player either sees or does not see the character they are controlling. The visual world onscreen can appear in a multitude of ways, changing the relationship of the character to the game space. This use of space has developed over time as technology advances have allowed greater choices for designers.

One of the first arrangements of character in space eliminated all visuals and relied completely on text. This type of game has no referent and relies on descriptive language. *Zork* and its many sequels are examples of this type of interface. These games still persist online, often drawing from science fiction and fantasy novels for inspiration. For some players, this removal of visual elements allows a greater focus on story and
character development. Also, some players reject visuals of worlds based in literary works such as Tolkien’s novels.

Historically with games such as Pong, Space Invaders, and Pac-Man the action was contained in a single screen, limiting the spatial variation. Pong is completely limited to the screen space with the exception of the off-screen space where the ball disappears when missed by the player. In Space Invaders, the off-screen space is home to the world of the evil invaders as they appear at the top of the screen, spiraling down on the player’s single ship. Pac-Man functions slightly differently, using the single screen but utilizing off-screen space in a particular fashion. As the chomping hero works his way across the screen, exits are available to either side of the screen, which Pac-Man uses like a backstage passage, moving from one side of the screen to the other out of player view. Mark J.P. Wolf identifies this backstage passage as a “wraparound” technique. Although this style of game seems antiquated, it remains popular in several puzzle games; Bejeweled, Alchemy, and Collapse use this format.

Games like Pac-Man and Donkey Kong added to the on-screen and off-screen dynamic by using the first cut scenes to give players a break in the action. In Pac-Man when a player has successfully chomped all the glowing dots, he/she is rewarded with a clear screen and a short animation that provides some information on Pac-Man and the ghosts while also allowing the player a chance to relax his/her grip on the joystick. This style of play provided the first sense of levels in games as each time the player returned to the onscreen world of glowing dots and ghosts, the game became more difficult to beat.

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The next evolution of game space is located in the ability to scroll in a single screen. Originally, games such as *Pitfall*, and *Super Mario Brothers* scrolled on the horizontal plane. The player controls the character, which is continually moving forward in the action. This was expanded to allow for scrolling along both the horizontal and vertical axis in games such as *Zelda, SimCity*, and early versions of the *Final Fantasy* series. With this dual control, players can move characters in a range of motion as the screen scrolls to accommodate the directional choice.\(^{21}\)

In this two dimensional space, the player is constantly aware of changing spatial relations but with only a relatively flat sensibility. With the development of three-dimensional capabilities, the player could experience space more completely, as the variables of height, depth, and width became accessible as reference points. The use of three-dimensional space to create the game world expands the potential of the game. The player becomes more connected to the physical space of the game, gaining a greater sense of immersion into the environment. Games such as *DOOM* and *Quake* utilize the three-dimensional space\(^{22}\) to create a stronger sense of dramatic tension, using a first-person viewpoint to force the player to draw on spatial information to maneuver through the game environment.

**Delineations of Narrative Space: Location and Fiction**

With the establishment of the physical spaces of theatre, McAuley looks to the narrative to deepen the exploration of space. The narrative dictates fictional space. The

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\(^{21}\) Additionally, Wolf makes a strong case for multiple arrangements of two-dimensional space that have a historic place in the development of sporting and adventure genre games. These include multiple, nonadjacent screens displayed simultaneously and adjacent spaces displayed onscreen at the same time.

\(^{22}\) *DOOM* is actually a 2-dimensional game while *Quake* uses three-dimensional geometry. However, both appear to be 3-D, using forced perspective to create the illusion of geometry in *DOOM*.
illusory world of the play is communicated by the playwright and then interpreted by
designers, performers, and directors to be placed before the audience. The demands of
the dramatic action determine how the fictional space functions as well as indicating the
physical relationship of the playing space to the larger world of the narrative. For
example, Tennessee Williams’s *Streetcar Named Desire* creates a fictional apartment in
New Orleans in 1947. Williams, allowing the production team to create that fictional
reality onstage, convey the textures, sounds, and scents of that place in the text. Once
physically located within the dramatic action, the audience becomes aware of the
interconnected world that surrounds the fictional world of the play. That awareness
allows the audience to accept that the physical action of walking offstage can represent
leaving the apartment and going into the larger world of 1947 Southern America.

Within fictional space, the game pushes beyond the limits of visual imagination.
The game space is itself a fictional space: a virtual reality. Monsters and myth are
brought to life in richly textured artistic expressions that continually edge closer to
photorealistic representations of the fantastic. McAuley further delineates this fictional
place in her development of the Location and Fiction area of categorization. The
development of this area pushes at the idea of localization being related to the dramatic
action. Beginning with onstage and offstage places, the question of fictional space is
oriented by the visual or textual representations of place. Offstage places, common in
drama, afford the action to be described rather than seen.\(^2\) Such action is limited within
the game spectrum as much of the focus of the action is the exploration of the world by
the main character. However, some actions occur offstage or off-screen within the game,

\(^2\) *Space in Performance*, 30-31.

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advancing the story. These actions are usually located in the place of the moment and are revealed after the occurrence to motivate action in the characters. Places for trading information and resting are traditionally modeled on inns or taverns, mimicking the real social environments so that players innately follow behavioral patterns allowing the game to advance. These onscreen locations allow communication that provides description and impetus for later actions and places within the game.

Further spatial relations developed within the fictional place are localized or unlocalized in McAuley’s delineation. Localization refers to the contiguous relationship of place offstage to the place onstage. For the gamer, such delineation is possible although not often recognized. Many stories advance from place to place, creating a sense of linearity. This often is based on contiguous relationship. Basically, in many stories, the character cannot advance without visiting particular places in the story in a particular order. This order is often determined by the placement of the various locations in the geographic world of the game. For many games, the adventurer begins on foot, unable to cross oceans or mountain ranges without aid. Therefore, he/she can only visit places that are in a contiguous relationship to his/her location. As the games progress, often items or powers are revealed to allow the character to advance to the next level or place which is often geographically aligned to his/her location.

Within game design, McAuley’s concept of localization can be identified to three places where storytelling can occur: out-of-game, in-game, and external materials. Richard Rouse best explains these in his book, *Game Design Theory and Practice*:

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24 *Space in Performance*, 31.
• **Out-of-game**: This is any storytelling that is done on the computer while the game is running, but when the player is not actually playing the game. This includes any cut-scenes during which the player loses control of his character, such as the cut-scenes or mission briefings...

• **In-game**: Logically, this is the opposite of the above, and covers any storytelling that occurs while the player is actually playing the game. This includes the setting of the game-world, the behavior of the player’s opponents, any dynamic conversations the player may have, and any interactive pre-mission planning the player may do.

• **External materials**: This includes any storytelling done completely outside of the computer, such as in an introduction written in the manual or any paraphernalia that may come with the game, such as a map or a collection of gems.25

In the description of the term out-of-game, Rouse mentions the use of cut scenes. This term refers to animated action sequences that develop the story. The release of the PlayStation console allowed for greater graphics capabilities, allowing game designers to include cut scenes that are mini-movies, complete with detailed graphics, background and dialogue sound clips, and strong thematic content. Pulling from cinematic tradition to advance plotlines visually, the cut scene is also an example of the moments when the player becomes audience, watching the characters develop without any interactive control. In 1997, *Final Fantasy VII* was released for PlayStation in the United States, introducing gamers to this technique which has become an industry standard.26

**Textual Space and Thematic Space**

McAuley finishes the categorization of space with Textual Space and Thematic Space. Textual Space is tied to the spatial references contained within the written text both in dialogue and in stage directions.27 Textual Space is defined by the designers,


26 *Pac-Man* actually introduces cut scenes, but *Final Fantasy VII* is often credited with this as the cut scenes in *FFVII* advance the story and the characters while *Pac-Man* is generally a respite for the player.
directors, and performers in the presentation of the material. For the game, the textual space exists in the designer world. The creation of the game begins from idea and follows patterns of development similar to the creation of dramatic texts. Of note here is the connection between dialogue and creation of space. With dramatic texts there is no supplementary information to guide the mind of the audience. In the development of the game design, the focus of the text is on the journey that the player will take. The interpretation of the world in which that journey takes place is developed in a fashion similar to theatrical practice. When monsters are named (ghoul, zombie, demon, etc.), there is no description to articulate the visual manifestation. Instead, character designers work to find a visual choice that will remain consistent with the fictional place and the textual story to maintain an artistic concept. The action in the videogame is advanced through dialogue interactions, although that is shifting to employ filmic techniques of storytelling alongside dialogue exchanges.

Thematic Space is explained as the meanings and values attached to spatial relationships and uses outside the dramatic focus.  

As with any choice, the outside perceptions of the audience member can shift the intended meaning. With games, this is continually used to create the rules of the game world. Games predominantly feature fictional places outside conventional experience. When a player enters that world, they must have some frames of reference by which to plan their own actions. As a result, most games share similar spatial frames for the architecture of worlds so gamers can become quickly acclimated to the environment. By using references from the real world

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28 Space in Performance, 32-33.
as well as common structures within other games, the player is able to enter the fictional place more easily than when confronted with a world that has no awareness of the thematic potentials of space.

With this structuring of game space, the next logical point of examination within games is the structure of narrative within games. Through such exploration, Textual and Thematic Space become more evident as the workings of game plots are exposed. The player’s external location to the game world becomes unimportant as the immersive nature of the fictional spaces created within the games encourages a willing suspension of disbelief. The gamer’s relationship to physical space becomes secondary to the relationship with the narrative world generated within the game.
A rising concern is, ‘How do we graft a story onto our action game?’ Story means linear...right? The whole idea of a story is opposed to the idea of interactivity...right? The basic concern is ‘How do we make an effective interactive story?’ So what does effective mean in terms of interactive storytelling? There are two basic ingredients. These are intuitive interface designs and compelling stories.¹

Over the past 40 years, games have developed exponentially in comparison to other art forms, pulling from literature, theatre, film, television, and other sources to devise plot structures that will guarantee popularity. It is often the case, however, that the construction of game plots and characters appears flimsy or two-dimensional, lacking the emotional tension of drama or the complexity and depth of literature. Games have yet to discover their own unique formula for developing stories that connect to the player beyond an initial, surface association. Game designer Chris Crawford speaks skeptically of the ‘long and twisted history’ of games and storytelling, pinpointing Brenda Laurel as the initial proponent of attempting to truly merge the game world and successful narrative.² As Crawford states,


This is the essential difference between game designers and storytellers: The game designers see the universe - everything! - as a gigantic physical system that need only be simulated with sufficient fidelity to achieve any goal. The notion that you can define the universe in human terms seems utter nonsense to them. [...] To them [game designers], drama is just one more physical system to be simulated, like ballistics or optics.³

In 1986, Brenda Laurel proposed an Interactive Fantasy (IF) System that would bring dramatic structure into the world of the computers in the form of an electronic game. In her dissertation, Laurel provided a design for an IF System based on Aristotelian rules from *The Poetics* that would ultimately create an interactive, first-person drama that would provoke an emotionally fulfilling experience that was equivalent to a live dramatic performance. Her design predates the majority of the games discussed in this work, yet her basic assumptions of dramatic principles are still relevant in assessing narrative structure. The IF System proposed by Laurel utilizes a ‘media room’ that allows the user to interact with the computer-driven world through word and action, creating a technological collaborator for the imagination of the individual. The computer, using rules of dramatic theory and the guidelines of a fantasy realm to engage the human user, monitors this narrative world. Today electronic games have begun to surpass Laurel’s original proposal, necessitating a structural analysis and critique to develop better games for the commercial market.

The fascination with developing a computer-based interactive drama continues in both scholarship and practice. Scholars such as Janet Murray and Marie-Laure Ryan have written key texts that tender theories on the nature of narrative in relation to digital

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media and interactivity. In *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, Janet Murray presents a tri-partite theory of immersion, transformation, and agency that will be discussed in more detail later in Chapter 6 in relation to interactivity. In *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, Ryan focuses on representation in digital media and the conception of virtual reality as a semiotic phenomenon. Her approach to narrative presents three narrative techniques, temporal, spatial, and emotional, as the primary means of creating immersive environments. To Ryan games are a logical place of exploration for expanding traditional literary narrative techniques into a more modular ‘building block’ system. Other testing grounds for such theories include the Oz Project (Carnegie Mellon University), the performance group Plain Text Players (University of California, Irvine under the direction of Antoinette LaFarge) and Façade (an independent experiment by Michael Mateas). These games and performance projects utilize computer scientists and artists to create practical cyberspace environments in which to test questions of interactive narrative. However, to date there has been no critical examination of the existing narrative forms, played daily by millions of users, within the industry. Instead, artists and educators have focused on specific research questions, bypassing the commercial game as too narrow, too rigid, or too popular to be of value in assessing interactive potentials. With the development of the current commercial gaming market

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6 Michael Mateas in “A Preliminary Poetics for Interactive Drama and Games” claims to advance Laurel’s work in relation to gaming. Yet his work serves to rearticulate Laurel’s work for research purposes rather than directly applying to the commercial game market making him less useful for this inquiry. Façade is a game but it is not a commercial product. Instead, it is described as an artificial intelligence-based art/research experiment in electronic narrative. See his website, <http://www.quvu.net/interactivestory.net/> for more details and information.
and the evolution of technology, the structure of games is changing, necessitating a new means of exploring narrative.

Laurel and Interactive Fantasy: Aristotle meets Computers

In her early 1986 research, Laurel mapped out a possible interactive dramatic structure defining Aristotle’s six structural points of plot, character, thought, dialogue, music, and spectacle in a traditional dramatic setting alongside the same concepts adjusted for interactivity. Conventional drama is paralleled with what she calls “poetic interactive works.” As defined by Laurel, a poetic interactive work is a sub-class of mimetic works having as their goal “to entertain, engage, or please the humans who play with them, inviting the user to partake of the vicarious experiences of emotion and to delight in the imitation.”\(^7\) Laurel focuses on adventure games (text-based electronic narrative games), video games (broadly referring to all computer, arcade and video games at the time), and recreational simulations (primarily meaning early virtual reality environments) as being representative of the poetic interactive. Following this, in 1992 she mapped Aristotle’s elements again but this time with what she calls “human-computer activity.” As Laurel explains in *Computers as Theatre*, human-computer activity focuses on the interface of human and computer as a cognitive and emotional experience.\(^8\) In Figure 3.1, both maps are combined into one table for easy comparison.

In all three cases – Drama (Aristotle as simplified by Laurel), Poetic Interactive Works (Laurel 1986), and Human-Computer Activity (Laurel 1992) – the structure of interaction

\(^7\) Brenda Laurel, "Towards the Design of a Computer-Based Interactive Fantasy System," diss., Department of Theatre, The Ohio State University, 1986

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<th>Element</th>
<th>In Drama</th>
<th>In Poetic Interactive Works⁹</th>
<th>In Human-Computer Activity¹⁰</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Action</strong></td>
<td>The whole action being represented. The action is theoretically the same in every performance.</td>
<td>The whole action, which is interactively shaped by both system and user. The outcome may vary with each interactive session.</td>
<td>The whole action, as it is collaboratively shaped by system and user. The action may vary in each interactive session.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Character</strong></td>
<td>Bundles of predispositions and traits, inferred from agents’ patterns of choice.</td>
<td>The same as in drama, but including the user as well as fictitious agents.</td>
<td>The same as in drama, but including agents of both human and computer origin.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Thought</strong></td>
<td>Inferred internal processes leading to choice; cognition, emotion, and reason.</td>
<td>The same as in drama, but including the user.</td>
<td>The same as in drama, but including processes of both human and computer origin.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Language</strong></td>
<td>The selection and arrangement of words; the use of language.</td>
<td>The selection and arrangement of discursive signs, including visual, auditory, and other nonverbal signs when used linguistically.</td>
<td>The selection and arrangement of signs, including verbal, visual, auditory, and other nonverbal phenomena when used semiotically.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Melody</strong></td>
<td>Everything that is heard, but especially the melody of speech.</td>
<td>(same)</td>
<td>The pleasurable perception of pattern in sensory phenomena. (Pattern)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Spectacle</strong></td>
<td>Everything that is seen.</td>
<td>(same)</td>
<td>The sensory dimensions of the action being represented: visual, auditory, kinesthetic and tactile, and potentially all others. (Enactment)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3.1: The six qualitative elements of structure in drama, in poetic interactive works, and in human-computer activity.


follows a linear organization. Additionally the latter two are shaped by the human user and monitored by the computer intelligence. When considered in this diagram, Laurel’s distinctions between the poetic interactive and the human-computer dynamic are minimal yet both depart substantially from the dramatic. For example, in paralleling the concept of plot Laurel’s summation of Aristotle presents a singular action that is theoretically repeatable and unchangeable, shaped by the playwright. Her paradigm for both computer-mediated situations transforms the traditional plot into an interactive/collaborative development between human and computer with a potential for variance. In Laurel’s plan for interaction, Aristotle is an inescapable touchstone, shaping the understanding of narrative formation.

By using Aristotle and her concept of the poetic interactive, Laurel creates an idealized “computer-based interactive fantasy system” (IFS) which demands an awareness of dramatic structure to function effectively. It must be remembered that Laurel was the first to do this, that her concepts were considered groundbreaking. Her work may also be seen as partially responsible for the transformation of the gaming world from ‘geek oddity’ to popular culture due to her awareness of the inherently theatrical nature of the interface. Her visionary definition in 1986 of the experience of interactive drama is as follows:

An ‘interactive drama,’ then is a first-person experience within a fantasy world, in which the user may create, enact, and observe a character whose choices and actions affect the course of events just as they might in a play. The structure of the system proposed in this study utilizes a playwriting expert system that enables first-person participation of the user in the development of the story or plot, and orchestrates system-controlled events and characters so as to move the action forward in a dramatically interesting way.11 (itals mine)

11 Laurel, "Towards the Design of a computer-based interactive fantasy system" 10-11.
In other words, the computer becomes a playwright in the following way: the computer script contains a variety of queries and responses, selected by the computer in direct response to the actions of the user/player. To achieve a sense of story that holds some dramatic tension, these questions and answers must follow some dramatic rule to create interesting scenarios. The rules of drama that Laurel incorporates are Aristotelian, focusing on developing plot structures based on escalating tension created through careful revelations of story in an incremental fashion. In this “playwright expert system,” dramatic action is linear, requiring a beginning, middle, and end.

The beginning of the play (or game) is seen to have multiple possibilities. A character’s behavior is relatively open, lacking a particular goal or objective. As the gamer plays the game, objectives, and conflicts are revealed, leading to probable courses of action. In selecting a course of action, the player starts on a path that leads to a conclusion. To reach the end of the action, the possibilities continually narrow through the action of playing the game, revealing a path with fewer and fewer options to reach the end.\(^\text{12}\) This reduction of options creates dramatic tension and interest as the player is engaged in discovering the path to completion. As an expert system, the computer as playwright guides the player through this process of discovery.

Theatrically, the gamer is both spectator and performer following the playwright/computer to the terminus of the game. The active participation of the gamer provides an experience akin to acting itself – the assumption of character and decision-

\(^{12}\) Laurel, "Towards the Design of a computer-based interactive fantasy system" 58-59. Laurel provides a clarification of Aristotelian theory. Her version provides the basis which will be expanded further in the chapter in relation to the genre of first-person shooters.
making. However, unlike an actor who knows the end of the story, the gamer discovers the story while in the midst of it. This revelation of plot holds the gamers’ interest in the same manner as a play captures an audience. Using a playwright expert system to generate narrative immerses the gamer and suggests that individual choice propels the action. Thus, the user/player contributes to the development and revelation of the narrative structure through making choices. These choices potentially transform the story development: opening new levels\textsuperscript{13} for exploration, adding new characters to the story, shifting player goals, etc. These choices are programmed in such a way that the user assumes they are random and in-the-moment. However, this apparent randomness is an illusion created by the programmer/designer of the game. In actuality, the evolving story is orchestrated by the computer, which is programmed to be a stand-in for a playwright. This immediate, real-time reaction creates an illusion of dramatic interaction between artificial intelligence and the human player.

Laurel limited her work to Aristotle and the linear narrative, which was in keeping with the games of the mid to late 80’s. With the growth of the game market, other narrative structures have emerged which parallel post-Aristotelian, twentieth century theatre. These commercial variants from Laurel’s paradigm of interactive drama have all attempted to create ‘interactive fantasy systems’ with varying degrees of success. In the following, I position three contemporary game genres with three theatre theorists. All three genres utilize role-playing elements and place story in a position of prominence to

\textsuperscript{13} Levels in games can refer to new geographic locations as well as new complexities in the creation of characters. Geographically, a new level opens allowing access to an unexplored territory providing a new challenge or goal for the player. In relation to character, the act of ‘leveling up’ means increasing the character’s existing statistics such as adding health or gaining new abilities. In this broad overview of structural development, the use of the term level is applied to both circumstances.
capture gamer attention. Building on Laurel, third person action games$^{14}$ correspond to Aristotle and linear plot structure. Expanding linear structures, traditional role-playing games (RPGs) match to Bertolt Brecht and Epic Theatre. Finally, the most open plot structures of massive multi-player online role-playing games (MMORPG) are a manifestation of Augusto Boal’s theories concerning theatre in relation to his concept of Forum Theatre. Before analyzing these three with specific game examples, it is necessary to examine the architecture of plot within current game design theory.

**Plot Basics: Finding Treasure – Killing Monsters – Saving the World**

When designing games, the majority of development is focused on developing the visual world of the game and its interface, insuring that the player is dazzled by visual spectacle. The premise of plot is a vehicle to support game play; an often simplistic device to provide a reason for the characters to kill monsters and hunt treasure. The degree of reliance on story and the resulting intricacy can be viewed on a continuum of involvement and depth.

![Figure 3.2: A story continuum with genre delineations](image)

$^{14}$ I am using this term to cover games that I consider hybrids of traditional first-person shooters and RPG games. This type of game utilizes a third person camera perspective and contains more narrative than the traditional FPS games such as Quake or Doom but less narrative than traditional RPGs.
Categories of games and their dependence on story to motivate action are graphically represented in Figure 3.2. Utilizing broad genre categories, this diagram positions the relationship of story to game play. At the left hand side, games with little or no reliance on story include the genres of arcade and puzzle games. These games rely on the challenge of puzzle solving to capture player interest or utilize simple super objectives to motivate game play. On the right, games with integral storylines such as RPGs and MMORPGs indicate a strong utilization of dependence on story for generating player interest and action. These games provide lengthy plot lines and spend considerable effort in generating complete environments, focusing on immersing the player in the narrative.

Genre is a common factor in distinguishing categories for gamers much like theatregoers use genre as a guide for characterizing the kinds of plays they wish to see. In relation to these broad categorizations, players can quickly judge the structure of the game although, much like theatre, games are continually crossing genre boundaries and pushing against the stereotypes imposed by such labels. Puzzle games like Tetris or arcade games like Space Invaders are examples of the minimalist approach, requiring that the player only needs to learn the mechanics of the game to play. Story is negligible, sometimes as simple as a sentence, serving only to motivate game play. The premise of the game sparks the player’s imagination – to save the world, to find the treasure, to kill

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15 See Andrew Rollings and Ernest Adams, Andrew Rollings and Ernest Adams on Game Design (Indianapolis: New Riders, 2003) 90 for a similar chart. I have added other genres as well as placing story in more prominence in relation to FPS and strategy games due to plot and character structures which are discussed in this chapter. The placement of MMORPG games as being the most story-driven of the genres is a controversial decision as many designers feel that it is only now that the structures for online gaming can support more detailed storylines. This continuum assumes that the growth rate of the design innovations will continue to advance to match the potentials evidenced in the games of 2003 and the games projected for 2003/04 such as Final Fantasy XI, The SIMS Online and World of Warcraft. All these games are advertising themselves as the next evolution of online gaming, suggesting a shift in design capabilities and storytelling potentials.
the monster, etc. – providing a framing device for the game, simple objectives that camouflage the increasing feats of dexterity required to beat the computer and win the game. In *Pac-Man*, the player is not required to understand of Pac-Man’s inner struggle while racing away from the floating ghosts who stalk him. Instead, the player is drawn into the game mechanics, strategizing how best to utilize the joystick to devour all the blinking lights and floating fruits while avoiding being consumed by the ghosts. The focus of the game is to conquer the individual levels, accumulating more points as the dexterity required to ‘win’ increases.

While the early arcade style games have continued to evolve, creating an increasing number of puzzle games, other genres of games have developed, utilizing complicated stories as a focal point of gaming. Good stories are crucial in an industry driven to create entertainment experiences based on longevity and replayability. Games like *Grim Fandango* (adventure genre) and *Xenogears* (traditional RPG) create complex narratives that entice the player to continue playing in order to discover how the adventure ends. These games hold elements of mystery, driving the player to keep playing through intrigue rather than evoking the competitive drive that motivates arcade, fighting and sporting games. Winning is not connected to scoring in these games; instead, the experience of playing and reaching the end are the rewards for hours of

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16 Rusel DeMaria and Johnny L. Wilson, *High Score! The Illustrated History of Electronic Games* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2002) 62. This is not to say that the creatures in *Pac-Man* do not have a unique sense of character. In actuality, Pac-Man is considered the first ‘character’ in gaming, complete with an identity and persona. Additionally, the four ghosts were provided with character names as well as nicknames as follows: Red: Shadow (“Blinky”) / Pink: Speedy (“Pinky”) / Blue: Bashful (“Inky”) / Orange: Pokey (“Clyde”).

17 In many puzzle games such as *Tetris* and *Space Invaders* the player can never win. Instead, the goal becomes to gain the most points, allowing the player to enter his/her high score into the game, in effect beating other players.
intensive play. Joshua Mosqueira, a designer and writer for RPG games, summarizes the importance of story as follows: “Story, and its characters, is also what players remember and identify with. Craft a well-detailed story with memorable characters, and you will have created a game that lives beyond the monitor.”18 The games that accomplish this goal have the textured sensibility of novels, often using lengthy animated sequences to advance the storyline and reward the player for progressing in the game.

Game play develops using logical structures, allowing the player to make choices along the way that directly influence the nature of play in a systematic and linear fashion. To that end, game development is often based on a story matrix that maps out basic goals for each segment of play, charting the overall action in a simulation of traditional dramatic structure.19 These matrixes allow designers to see the gross overview of the story, focusing on the points that cannot be changed by user interaction to create plot points for developing the story. Story elements are delineated and defined in relation to character development (broad strokes of villains and heroes) and level progression. The basic plot structure is charted to trace the path of the player in relation to the dramatic events of the story. This is similar to the theatrical process of playwriting, crafting the story to propel the action forward. Each major element of change in the path becomes synonymous with an environment change in the game; entering a new dungeon (changing the scenery), shifting to another character (introducing subplots and interweaving


19 Bruce Onder, "Storytelling in Level-Based Game Design," *Game Design Perspectives*, ed. Francois Dominic Laramee (Hingham, MA: Charles River Media, 2002) 296-97. Although Onder is specifically discussing level-based game design, the nature of sim, RPG, and MMOG gaming utilizes similar structures to create coherency in the game story.
storylines), or encountering more dangerous and/or challenging enemies (escalating plot points of action through obstacles and conflict).

Typically, designers use mainstream film as the model for discussing plot structures in the existing but limited discourse. Hence, the concept of the ‘Hollywood formula’ presented as a ‘tried-and-true’ method for developing a storyline that is guaranteed to achieve dramatic tension and audience interest. This filmic approach can be reduced to three basic components: a three-act structure (beginning, middle and end), a percentage formula for calculating the best use of time in telling the story (25% for Act I, 50% for Act II, 25% for Act III), and the ‘car chase rule’ which implies that the narrative trajectory is put on hold for the obligatory action scene.20 The use of such formulaic approaches to structure admittedly connects with a wider audience, appealing to existing patterns of escapist entertainment. Yet this formulaic construction ignores the dimension of interactivity available to gaming and falls short of an emotionally evocative dramatic experience. Marc Laidlaw, in-house writer for Valve Software (Half-Life), expresses problem of games and effective narrative as follows:

As far as narrative structure, games are often rigidly structured; I don’t think lack of structure is a problem at all. What's lacking is the emotional impact that usually accompanies structural highpoints or turning points in traditional narratives. In most games, the feeling of finally achieving your goal is one of relief rather than elation or insight; the climax often merely marks a break from increasing frustration.21

Both Laidlaw, and Crawford before him, are rightfully critical of the industry’s lack of dramatically compelling stories. Both advocate the importance of dramatic narrative and

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20 Onder, "Storytelling in Level-Based Game Design" 291-91.

the failings of current industry practice. The following section will examine three narrative structures in games as connected to theatrical theory, providing a new frame for discussing plot structures in relation to game genres and potential dramatic impact.

**Linear Structure and Third Person Action: Aristotle meets Lara Croft**

We have already seen the significance of Aristotle in Laurel’s work. Much of dramatic theory and criticism begins with the Greeks and with Aristotle in particular. As a critic, he provided the first thorough discussion of *how* drama functioned rather than concentrating solely on *why* drama existed as Plato did. His understanding of dramatic structure begins by expressing the nature of drama as an imitation of an action. The presentation of that action in the dramatic mode of performance is best examined using six qualitative elements: plot, character, thought (idea), dialogue, music, and spectacle. Plot occupies the position of most importance in Aristotle’s world. Within the *Poetics*, Aristotle presents the plot as the combination of incidents that make up the whole action. That action includes a natural beginning, middle, and end. Following a singular objective, the whole action is complete and dramatically engaging as an imitation of life. This path is linear, building a sequence of events one on top of the other, creating dramatic tension in an escalating fashion due to the singular nature of the objective.\(^\text{22}\)

Gustav Freytag, a nineteenth century German dramatist and critic, translates Aristotle’s method into a simple geometrical figure. Freytag’s Aristotelian approach is based on a triangular build of tension over time.\(^\text{23}\) Figure 3.3 presents a graphic interpretation of the Freytag triangle. This simplified drawing focuses on the rise and fall

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\(^{23}\) Gustav Freytag, *Technique of Drama*. 86
of the intensity of the plot. The climax is positioned at the apex of the triangle, indicating the moment of greatest emotional intensity. This position is incorrect in relation to time as the climax is often located late in the action to maintain audience interest. The falling action or

![Freytag's Triangle](image.png)

**Figure 3.3:** A graphic representation of Freytag’s triangular build

denouement is generally brief, serving to placate audiences by resolving the action of the plot – tying up loose ends. This stair step approach which builds tension through a logical progression of escalating conflict assumes that action occurs in a relatively compressed period of time. The audience joins a story in progress shortly before the most intense moments of dramatic action. The plot contains the moments of action that the audience is privy to, late in the life story of the characters. Game designers advocate
the writings of Aristotle and Freytag as blueprints of dramatic structure guaranteed to create an audience connection to story.\textsuperscript{24}

Within games, Freytag’s graphic building block Aristotelian structure is a common tool for creating simple narratives. The genre, which draws most from this, is the first-person shooter, an evolution of the action genre.\textsuperscript{25} Action games are synonymous with arcade games. The oldest genre of games, action titles test reflexes and hand-eye coordination earning the moniker of ‘twitch games’. As the first genre, action games have rapidly evolved, developing splinter genres such as the FPS. The first person shooter involves an avatar (main character played by the gamer), a variety of ranged or firing weapons (such as guns, missile launchers, grenades), and a variety of enemies to overcome and/or destroy in pursuit of a singular objective. The nature of the game requires simplicity of information to allow the brain to focus on the immediate tasks of running, jumping and shooting. The games, irrevocably linked with violence, focus on fighting enemies and escaping dire situations while moving from one level to another such as in the classic titles \textit{Doom} (1993) and \textit{Quake} (1996).

In the mid-90’s designers attempted to pull away from the pure action of the FPS by giving more weight to narrative. This gradual transformation shifted the first person camera perspective (seeing as the character) to third person (over the shoulder) as well as

\textsuperscript{24} See the writings of Littlejohn, "Adapting the Tools of Drama to Interactive Storytelling."; Michael Mateas, "A Preliminary Poetics for Interactive Drama and Games," \textit{Digital Creativity} 12.3 (2001): 140-52; Mark Stephen Meadows, \textit{Pause & Effect: The Art of Interactive Narrative} (Indianapolis: New Riders, 2003); Rollings and Adams, \textit{Andrew Rollings and Ernest Adams on Game Design}. as examples.

\textsuperscript{25} The FPS genre is also divided between 2D (\textit{BattleZone}) and 3D (\textit{Quake, Unreal Tournament, Wolfenstein 3D}) titles. For the purpose of this inquiry I have considered the 2D titles to be a part of the action genre, using the evolution of 3D titles as one of the main evolutionary points responsible for the creation of the FPS genre as a distinctive category. Also, players for 3D FPS games do play as characters, but more the focus of the game is on pure action – shooting and killing all monsters or villains on a level to advance.
the development of character identities. Rather than simply being an anonymous fighter saving the planet, the gamer becomes a named character with some biographical detail (however minimal) that includes a back-story and internal motivations. This evolution can be labeled as the 3rd person action genre\(^{26}\) and melds elements of RPGs, action, adventure, and FPS games to create a hybrid genre that utilizes real-time reactive fighting situations with more story driven plots and identifiable characters utilizing a specific camera angle to engage the player. Figure 3.4 identifies key similarities between the linear, Aristotelian structure and the 3rd person action genre: a three-act structure, immediacy of action, and a single character focus with a clear objective.

![Figure 3.4: Linear Structure, Aristotle, and Third Person Action](image)

\(^{26}\) 3rd person action is not necessarily used as a distinct genre in broad listing – this is a genre term based purely on interface rather than content. Its use allows inclusion for games like *Resident Evil* and *Fatal Frame* that are typically considered as Survival Horror.
These three key relationships can be seen in numerous third person action titles, but for the purpose of this study, the game *Tomb Raider*, considered a landmark title in the genre, provides a representative sample of plot structure. Developed in 1996 by Core Studios and Eidos Interactive, *Tomb Raider* and Lara Croft changed the face (and the body) of the action/adventure genre. Using a distinctive female character as the protagonist, a simple narrative and advanced 3D environments, the title allowed for exploration and acrobatics while searching remote tombs for treasure. The game, which has spawned multiple sequels, novels, and two film adaptations, created the first electronic gaming sex symbol while proving the validity and power of 3D action worlds.\(^{27}\) In *Tomb Raider*, the player can experience the action from multiple perspectives, a key difference from the FPS genre. Using a third person perspective camera, the player experiences the game as an active observer – able to watch Lara’s every move from a voyeuristic shoulder camera. With a twitch of the joystick, the player can shift to a first person perspective, seeing through Lara’s eyes. In both cases, the character moves freely about textured landscapes while exploring all the nooks and crannies of ancient tombs. The action of *Tomb Raider* is split into four main segments, designated by tombs in different geographic locations.

Figure 3.5 lays out the basic plot components of the game showing the first key relationship between Aristotle and *Tomb Raider*: a three-act structure. Additionally, the flow of the action mirrors the Hollywood formula of calculating action (25% - 50% -

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\(^{27}\) DeMaria and Wilson, *High Score! The Illustrated History of Electronic Games* 286-87. The novel spin-offs of the game are not mentioned in this text as they were published after its release.
Figure 3.5: Story Matrix for *Tomb Raider* – Linear progression of story from level to level with animated scenes (referred to as cut scenes) to advance the story development.
25%) almost exactly. The initial animated scene (similar to the prologue in traditional drama) quickly introduces the character of Lara Croft and presents a super-objective for the character – to obtain the Scion (a mystical object that provides the owner with immense power). The objective is immediately complicated by the fact that the Scion is actually in four pieces, necessitating a journey to find and capture each piece. In addition, this scene establishes the Natla Corporation (run by a female of the same name) as Lara’s employer but foreshadows potential conflict between Lara and Natla later in the game. As with any traditional dramatic prologue, the player is introduced to all the main points within the plot; Lara’s character is established, the objective outlined, and the journey begun in quick succession. This type of animated storytelling is commonly referred to as a cut scene. These mini-movies cut into the player’s action, placing the player into the role of spectator while the narrative is advanced. Upon completion of the cut scene, the player regains control of the character and returns to a state of active participation in the game. In the diagram, the placement of these cut scenes indicates the build of plot information, similar to Freytag’s outline of dramatic action.

With the frame of the narrative in place, Lara embarks on her first journey – Act I (25% of the action) – to discover a piece of the Scion. The first tomb has four major areas, each more challenging than the last to build tension in Lara’s journey. Upon recovery of the first piece of the Scion, Lara faces her first human enemy, another tomb raider employed by the Natla Corporation. This conflict shifts Lara’s path, increasing possibilities for dramatic conflict as the Natla Corporation becomes an adversary rather than employer. She begins Act II still pursing the Scion pieces but with the added complication of battling corporate flunkies alongside mythical beasts. A cut scene opens
the act to reveal the next location in Lara’s journey. Act II (50% of the action) encompasses the search for and discovery of two pieces of the Scion, continually escalating tension as Lara encounters enemies that are more difficult and more challenging puzzles within the ancient tombs – a progressive linear build of obstacles and complications. Act III (25% of the action) finds Lara going after the final piece of the Scion in multiple locations (Natla mines / Atlantis / Great Pyramid) against multiple adversaries. An additional animated scene, the only one to occur *during* Lara’s search for a Scion piece, inserted between Atlantis and the Great Pyramid, presents a confrontation between Lara and Natla (the individual rather than the corporation), leading to the final climactic level of the Great Pyramid. The use of a cut scene here points to the climactic nature of the final tomb/obstacle for Lara. The tomb entered directly following this exchange is the most challenging for the player to navigate, culminating in a final battle between Lara and the transformed Natla. With the achievement of her goal – locating all four pieces of the Scion – Lara has overcome all adversaries and the denouement is another cut scene with a typical ‘Hollywood’ ending of Lara riding off into the sunset on her motorcycle.

The second key relationship between Aristotle and third person action games is immediacy of action. The actions of the plot must occur within a definitive timeline – the length of the performance – generating dramatic tension by controlling the flow of action. All major action within the plot occurs within the slice of time that is shared by audience and character, forcing a shared journey of discovery. The third person action genre follows the same pattern, engaging the player in exploration while relying on immediacy to provide a sense of suspense and urgency. As Lara prowls the various tombs and
slowly pieces together the Scion, the action of the game follows a trajectory that escalates slowly but steadily. Figure 3.6 shows the arc of the action in relation to Freytag’s triangular approach, indicating this rise in dramatic intensity. Tension is created as the player is continually on edge, reacting to the various physical obstacles that Lara encounters with immediacy, depending on physical reactions (hand-eye coordination) to succeed. The animated cut scenes cover the chunks of time allocated for travel between the various tombs, allowing the player to focus on the super-objective of locating the Scion pieces. The discovery of adversaries and physical obstacles is instantaneous for Lara, occurring in the moment for the player. This focus on real-time action matches with Aristotle’s unity of time: “With plots: they should have length, but such that they are easy to remember. As to the limit of the length, the one is determined by the tragic competitions and the ordinary span of attention.”  

In other words, the player’s attention remains connected to the dramatic nature of Lara’s journey for the duration of playing – no more, no less – which is defined by the player by the action of picking up the joystick to initiate game play.

In addition to the focus on real-time action (immediacy of action) and the stair-step build in objectives (three-act structure), the third person action genre shares another structural point with linear drama – focus on a single primary character and a single

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29 In the course of this type of game play, the player inevitably dies multiple times, forcing him/her to replay various portions of the game. This is a replay of the action but remains connected to the dramatic action of the first time of play with the exception of achieving greater hand-eye coordination required to survive rather than die in overcoming the obstacle. As the player accumulates hours of replay time to get Lara successfully through a level, the dramatic action does not shift. Instead, the player’s focus shifts from being interested in story to being consumed by the need to ‘beat’ the game and survive to the next save point. Once that is accomplished, the narrative reasserts itself to propel the player to the next level or goal.
Figure 3.6: *Tomb Raider* in relation to the Freytag triangle
objective. With *Tomb Raider* and other games in the genre, the player functions as a single character. When playing as Lara, there are no subplots or secondary characters for the protagonist to deal with. The other characters are simple constructs to provide obstacles in the completion of the quest. The variety of evil agents Lara encounters are predominantly animals with the rare appearance of human tomb raiders such as Pierre and Larsen (see Figure 3.5 for the specific instances of this). These associations are usually simple exchanges of insults resulting in gunfire, negating any relationship development. The only character that Lara dramatically interacts with is Natla, developing their relationship in the cut scenes. This focused intensity serves a dual purpose. First, the game is kept ‘simple’ focusing the player on the hand-eye coordination required to ‘beat’ each level. Second, the sparse number of characters reduces the need for dialogue and interaction placing the simple objective at the forefront. This approach allows the player to spend the majority of the game in a reactive state, maintaining a link to the ‘twitch’ heritage of the adventure genre.

Other titles in the genre add interactive elements to ‘improve’ on the formula. For example, *Resident Evil* and *Nightmare Creatures* allow the player a choice between two established characters (a male and a female) before beginning the game. The plot follows the same structure for either character with slight variances created by the different skills of the characters. In the *Grand Theft Auto* series, the player tackles a variety of missions while working for the mob. The game focuses on completing those missions killing various enemies and innocents along the way, adding the element of driving to the genre. *Blood Rayne* continues the tradition of employing a female heroine to accomplish various challenges. Set in the WWII era, the vampire spy mimics Lara Croft’s athleticism but
adds heat vision and the ability to eviscerate enemies, draining them of their blood to replenish her strength. Despite these variations, the linear three-act structure with unified time and action remains persistent as the storytelling foundation for the genre.

However, the inherent weakness in this adoption of Aristotle lies in the lack of dramatic conflict within the game. The games have adopted the structure but only as a cookie-cutter pattern. As seen in Tomb Raider the only dramatic interaction occurs between Natla and Lara in Act III. As a cut scene, that relationship is limited and completely staged for the player to witness rather than experience interactively. The player is no longer being Lara, instead shifting to a passive audience state as the story unfolds. The player identifies with Lara and is interested in the conflict between Natla and Lara, but he/she is detached from interaction until the cut scene is completed. In the player’s interaction, Lara’s continual obstacle is not other humans but environments – the animals and surroundings change, but the basic premise remains unchanged. The narrative of the 3rd person action genre acknowledges a dramatic structure as a frame for the challenges of hand-eye coordination but fails to engage in dramatic conflict as Aristotle envisioned it.

The Epic and the RPG: Brecht meets Final Fantasy

In opposition to Aristotle’s linear dramatic structures, German theorist and playwright Bertolt Brecht proposed the concept of Epic Theatre. In the early 20th century, Brecht and other theatre artists struggled with the traditional approach to drama, finding conventional structure confining and unable to address the concerns of their contemporary world. Grounded in his Marxist political ideologies, Brecht believed in theatre as a means to creating social awareness and change. Brecht called for a “radical
transformation of the theatre,” using his theories and plays to create a theatre that would ask its spectators to question the status quo. Epic Theatre demanded a rational awareness on the part of the audience, focusing on engaging spectators in a detached manner to create an intellectual engagement that took precedence over the theatrical illusion. Determined to destroy the Aristotelian model of pathos, Brecht demanded that the workings of the theatre be exposed on every level. This exposure would ‘alienate’ the audience, by helping to create the distance necessary for the viewer to concentrate on the idea of the work rather than being caught in the emotional storm of the onstage characters. Furthermore, without the traditional theatrical illusion of painted scenery, box sets, and simulated realism, Brecht’s productions demonstrated how theatre worked, reinforcing the notion that theatre workers were workers like any other, rather than an artistic elite. Following in the tradition of other radical artists of the era such as Erwin Piscator (1893-1966) Brecht used the new production methods of the age including rotating stages, movable flats, projections, film, slides, and conveyor belts, to produce ‘proletarian drama’. Brecht’s writings and his work with the Berliner Ensemble (his theatre company founded in 1949) sought to create theatre that opposed the Wagnerian ideal of a ‘Gesamtkunstwerk’ (integrated work of art). For Brecht, every part of the whole was responsible for an independent commentary on the action, separate and unique.

Brecht begins his examination of the Epic using opera as representative of the ultimate in “pleasure merchandise.” Opera for Brecht is a hedonistic experience – a

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combination of sensory stimuli that feed a collective audience appetite. The musical examples of Brecht’s day were predominantly Wagnerian, seeking to be integrated, seamless productions. This blended experience is described in “The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre” as follows:

The irrationality of opera lies in the fact that rational elements are employed, solid reality is aimed at, but at the same time it is all washed out by the music. A dying man is real. If at the same time he sings we are translated to the sphere of the irrational.31

In contrast, Brecht wanted the music to work as independent element in his plays. Rather than supporting the theatrical illusion of traditional theatre, his Epic Theatre would address the idea of performance as entertaining consumption from a more radical angle, continually challenging the status quo.

His Epic Theatre would separate the audience from the emotionally saturate world of the performance, and Brecht proposed various devices to do so. First, the workings of the theatre should be visible, fully on view for the audience, by exposing the back wall of the theatre, lighting instruments, and scenic mechanisms. The continual awareness of being in a theatre serves to purposefully remind the audience that what they are witnessing is a fictional moment. Brecht suggests the use of placards to label each scene, encapsulating each moment before it is seen. Using songs and captions, he sought to break the dramatic rhythm, propelling the audience to become aware of the structure of the narrative rather than focusing on the emotions it creates. Most importantly, Brecht separates the episodes of the narrative as individual components that stand on their own. The order of those elements does not necessarily matter, only that the element is seen and

31 Brecht, Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic 35-36.
understood in the greater context of the narrative. For Brecht, structure is cyclical rather than linear resulting in a broader scope of characters, settings, and plot variations in contrast to the traditional Aristotelian ideal.

This shift in perspective allows for an expansion of understanding that can articulate and support non-linear drama in a manner that was unavailable with the Aristotelian paradigm. Brecht’s epic approach to theatre engages the concept of plot as narrative, eschewing linear structure for small, modular components that make up the story regardless of the order in which they are encountered. In “The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre” Brecht created a table that positioned Aristotle (Dramatic Theatre) against himself (Epic Theatre), separating various dramatic elements to show the differences between the two approaches to theatre.32

This split between Dramatic and Epic, Traditional and Modern, Aristotle and Brecht is mirrored in game genres. As we have seen, third person action games can be positioned as traditional Aristotelian games utilizing linear structures. In opposition, role-playing games can be aligned to Brecht’s idea of Epic Theatre, opening the focus of the game experience to cyclical structures and epic narratives. In Figure 3.7, these relationships have been expanded using Brecht’s existing table for the connections between Dramatic and Epic. By adding the third person action and role-playing genres, the similarities between theatre and game are suggested, opening avenues for further discussion. Aristotle’s Dramatic is associated with the third person action genre, intensifying the similarities discussed previously while the role-playing game (RPG) genre is aligned to Brecht’s Epic.

32 Brecht, Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic 37.
Figure 3.7: Transference of Dramatic Theatre to Brecht’s Epic Theatre to games
The RPG as a form has a long history with narrative. Before being adopted by
electronic games, the RPG existed as a pencil and paper game, played by groups of
individuals using imagination, dice, and occasionally miniature figures. The most well
known ‘old-fashioned’ RPG of this type is Dungeons and Dragons (D & D) although
other games such as Magic: the Gathering and several by White Wolf Publishing use the
same principles. Originally created on pen and paper following a rulebook, the goal of
RPGs was to cooperatively work through an imagined dungeon, battling magical
creatures with the success or failure of encounters being decided by the toss of dice. A
‘geek’ hobby, this form of gaming (also known as dungeon crawling) relied heavily on
the imagination of the players to achieve any semblance of dramatic engagement. With
the advent of electronic games, these dungeon crawls through paper labyrinths found a
new outlet, which allowed the previously imagined dungeons to become graphically
realized as digital environments complete with multiple non-playable characters that
aided in generating a stronger sense of dramatic engagement. Non-playable characters
(NPCs) provide information, clues, and exposition to the player. Complete with names
and identities, these NPCs add dimension and depth to the RPG allowing the world of the
game to become completely inhabited. The player can never control an NPC (hence the
non-playable attribute) but the addition of these characters elevates the narrative to a
more complete fictional reality inhabited by the player. Transformed by technology, the
RPG is a derivative of the classic text-based adventure game, relying heavily on story to
entice players through hours of seemingly tedious exploration and character building
(also known as ‘leveling up’) as well as creating visually and aurally rich environments.
Role-playing games focus on a series of challenges that result in building character
strengths while revealing story elements. Utilizing lengthy narratives, RPGs send
characters off to explore massive worlds, to meet and interact with numerous NPCs, and
to engage in multiple quests that serve to provide information and experience to the
characters. The form is epic in the traditional sense of the word, often encompassing a
hero’s journey from beginning to end. Much like the epics of Homer, RPGs combine
elements of myth and religion while embracing lengthy timelines, multiple characters,
and subplots to create dramatically engaging narratives.\footnote{It is also interesting to note that the content of these epic RPGs is focused on the political and social world of the game. Much as Brecht’s political ideologies infused all of his dramas, the RPG is drawn to the villain of society rather than focusing on man vs. himself or man vs. fate. Instead, most RPGs pit the player against a corporate or religious political structure as the primary antagonistic force. Individual villains reflect the larger evil and are often pawns in a larger ‘game’ with political and/or religious implications. This connection on the thematic level will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5 but the sense of epic in relation to traditional and Brechtian meanings implies a strong connection between the RPG and Epic Theatre.}

In distinguishing between Dramatic and Epic three points are particularly
interesting in relation to game structures. Figure 3.8 pinpoints these three as the
following: first, plot as a cyclical, modular structure; second, the spectator’s role outside
the experience rather than in the thick of it; third, capacity for action and engagement
within the game. In the following, I will use the console version of \textit{Final Fantasy VII}
(\textit{FFVII}) as an example of the RPG in relation to Epic Theatre. This game, released in
1997 for the PlayStation console and for the PC, is considered a landmark in the genre.
This game, by no means the first RPG, remains a classic example of the shift that
occurred in games, visually and thematically, with the release of 32-bit CD systems.
Propelled by advances in technology, games were able to explore the concept of the epic
in new ways – graphically and structurally. \textit{FFVII} includes 3 CDs that encompass over
50 hours of game play time. One of the first Japanese RPG games to ‘crack’ the U.S.
Epic Structure

Cyclical / Modular Plot Structures

Outside/Inside narrative dynamic

Capacity for action

Brecht

RPGs

Figure 3.8: Epic structure, Brecht, and the role-playing genre

market, *Final Fantasy VII*, created by Hironobu Sakaguchi, was the biggest selling game of 1997 worldwide. From its initial reviews to its continued popularity, the game is now finding new life as an animated film, *Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children*, due for release in summer 2004, which will further the storylines developed in the original game.

The scope of *FFVII* spans an entire world as the main character, Cloud Strife, attempts to discover his mysterious past and his connection to the evil corporation, Shinra. Along the way he is joined by eight playable characters (playable meaning that the gamer controls the character’s actions in battle) and encounters numerous NPCs who offer cryptic clues to motivate Cloud’s journey. Continually, the characters battle numerous minions of Shinra, most frequently Sephiroth, top warrior ‘hit man’ of the

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34 Steven L. Kent, *The Ultimate History of Video Games* (Roseville, CA: Prima, 2001) 543. This book cites Sakaguchi as quoting 6 million units of the game selling worldwide. It is also noted that the game was one of the first Square titles to sell better in the U.S. than in Japan.
corporation. Rather than following the linear path of *Tomb Raider*, this game explores city after city, environment after environment, continually using cut scenes to reveal plot points and to provide back-story for the relevant characters.

Figure 3.9 graphs the structure of *FFVII* and illuminates the first structural similarity between the RPG and Epic Theatre, cyclical, modular plot structure. *FFVII* is most easily broken into six chapters or episodes of action. Within each chapter, represented by a shaded grey band, there are some major plot points but the path to completing the unit is relatively free form. The player begins each chapter motivated by the plot development revealed at the end of the prior chapter – most often presented in a cut scene. For example, the end of chapter 3, “The Promised Land,” is fueled by a climatic battle, which results in the death of one of the predominant female characters, Aeris. Chapter 4, “The Reunion,” opens after the cut scene of Aeris’s death as the remaining characters struggle to unite and overcome the doubts created by Sephiroth’s victory. At this point, the player can visit almost any location in the game (the relevant areas are listed in the grey band of the diagram) and is encouraged to do so in hopes of gathering information and/or weaponry needed to facilitate challenging Sephiroth once again. As the player visits the various locations of the game, certain events are triggered, propelling the revelation of key facts. Some linearity is created in the initial chapters of the game, as certain areas of the world are inaccessible due to geographic constraints (later events allow the characters access to different modes of transportation); yet the gamer has surprising freedom, actively visiting locations to uncover pieces of the narrative.
Chapter I: Midgar
Locations open to visit: Midgar (Various sectors and the Shinra building)
Training Area for game
Meet Cloud (major character to be played throughout game) who has no memory
Set-up of Cloud’s past / Shinra Corporation as evil / Rescue Aeris / Escape from Midgar and the opening of the world map for exploration propels to next Chapter…
Recruit: Barret (begins game with Cloud) Tifa Aeris Red-XIII

Chapter II: Sephiroth
Locations open to visit: Midgar Area Kalm Chocobo Ranch Mythril Mine Condor Fort Junon Area (Upper and Lower) Transport Ship Costa Del Sol Corel Mountains North Corel (Gold Saucer) Corel Prison Gold Saucer Area Gongaga
Various flashbacks from characters revealing past connections with Shinra Corp. Following Sephiroth’s (Main villain of the narrative) Revelation of great danger to the planet propels to next Chapter…
Recruit: Cait Sith

Chapter III: The Promised Land
Locations open to visit: Gongaga Area Cosmo Canyon Cave of the Gi Nibelheim/Shinra Mansion Nibel Mountains & Reactor Rocket Town Utai Area Utai/Dashao Statues Utai Pagoda Gold Saucer Temple of the Ancients Bone Village/Zango Valley Forgotten City
Further confrontations with Sephiroth in various places Awareness of ‘odd’ events/ places in relation to memories for Cloud and Aeris Cloud’s struggle for memory intensifies Confrontation at end leads to death of Aeris and propels a time break then leading to next chapter…
Recruit: Cid Yuffie Vincent Valentine

Chapter IV: Reunion
Locations open to visit: Zango Valley Icicle Lodge Ice Gate Glacier Gaea’s Cliff Crater Whirwind Maze
Revelation of Cloud as a ‘clone’ Group rallies to battle the great evil of Sephiroth in new form Cloud lost to his internal struggle Loss of Cloud from party propels to next chapter… All characters recruited but require hunts for special weapons from this point on…

Chapter V: Meteor
Locations open to visit: **All areas changed due to meteor crash**
Junon Mideel Condor Fort Corel Mountain Undersa Reactor Rocket Town Cosmo Canyon Lucretia’s Cave Downed Shinra Plane Forgotten City Midgar Slums Midgar (Shinra Building) Sister Ray
Search for Cloud and the attempt to stabilize him mentally Find Cloud and search for way to avert destruction of planet Once find various weapons and complete side-quests return to Midgar which propels into final battle…

Chapter VI: Holy
Locations open to visit: Ancient Forest Final Dungeon
Must work party through Midgar as a dungeon Final battle with Sephiroth Cut scene at end is 500 years later showing Midgar as a ruin…but planet intact and flourishing

Figure 3.9: Final Fantasy VII Structure Map
There is a definitive narrative within *Final Fantasy VII*, yet the player’s journey to the end is circuitous, exploring multiple locations repeatedly to piece together an understanding of the characters and their narratives. The experience upon entering each location is complete in itself, but the information gained in that encounter adds to the narrative whole. This mirrors Brecht’s description of epic structure as a work that “…one can as it were take a pair of scissors and cut it into individual pieces, which remain fully capable of life.”

The piecing together of the narrative is dependent on the player’s presence in multiple locations, some of which have already been explored previously in the course of the narrative. Each location is the equivalent of a dramatic scene, which is inherently interesting and unique. The completion of the chapter (or act) is dependent on the player’s exploration of each scene but not necessarily in a particular order. This reflects Brecht’s concept of montage as opposed to the Aristotelian growth present in the linear structure of third person action games.

The second point of connection between the RPG and Epic Theatre is the spectator’s role both inside and outside the narrative. This dual perspective is directly connected to Brecht’s perception of theatrical space. In Brecht’s Epic Theatre, the environment of the action becomes a distinct entity, removed from the characters that inhabit it much like the world of *FFVII* is removed from the narrative of Cloud’s past and present. In “Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction,” Brecht describes the manifestation of the narrative in the epic form as follows:

> The stage began to tell a story. The narrator was no longer missing, along with the fourth wall. Not only did the background adopt an

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35 Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic* 70. In *Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction*, Brecht gives credit for this analogy to the epic writer Doblin.
attitude to the events on the stage - by big screens recalling other simultaneous events elsewhere, by projecting documents which confirmed or contradicted what the characters said, by concrete and intelligible figures to accompany abstract conversations, by figures and sentences to support mimed transactions whose sense was unclear - but the actors too refrained from going over wholly into their role, remaining detached from the character they were playing and clearly inviting criticism of him.36

Brecht points to the stage as a separate storytelling element, capable of commenting on the action. With the transition of the RPG from paper to virtual world, the environment gains tremendous importance as a separate but equal element in the creation of the narrative. Most often, the world of the game informs the player of the gaps in the narrative. In FFVII, the city of Midgar is rusted and ravaged, falling apart in comparison to the pristine Shinra Corporation building. This immediately provides a commentary on class and power structures calling the status quo of the world into question. By juxtaposing the wealth and power of Shinra against the slums of Midgar, the game world is informing the player of the social injustices that permeate and influence this reality. Over the course of the game, this sense of class conflict is personified in Cloud’s struggle to understand his own treatment at the hands of Sephiroth and Shinra, providing the identity to the conflict already suggested by the world of the game.

Beyond the commentary provided by the environment, the fantastical nature of the reality created serves to keep the player aware of the disparate nature of self versus the characters he/she controls in the course of the game, maintaining the detachment Brecht describes within his performers. Visually, the player is continually made aware of the game-playing apparatus, shuffling through menus and commands to trigger the actions of the character onscreen while battling monsters and magic. Aesthetically and

36 Brecht, Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic 71.
structurally, the visual experience is layered much like Brecht’s perception of stage space: the visual fantastic world comments on the narrative while surrounded by the machinery of character controls, distanc[108x654]ing the player from emotional response.

Another element of RPG structure that further splits the player as performer and observer is the use of cut scenes. As the player progresses through the narrative, the action is continually parsed into segments with the addition of cinematic scenes that fill in blocks of the narrative. Upon triggering a cut scene, the player is removed from control of the character and is placed firmly in the role of observer, focusing on narrative development rather than active control. The Final Fantasy series as a whole is recognized as one of the best examples of the use of the cut scene due to the artistry and complexity of the animations included in the games. The cut scene continually shifts the role of the player from performer to audience in the course of the game. Like Brecht’s use of film projection in theatre, cut scenes further the narrative while serving to present a wider view of the encompassing world of the game. While these mini-movies advance the action, the player physically relaxes, relinquishing control of the game while becoming intellectually active, piecing together the revelations presented in the cut scene.

Additionally, the console RPG also adds another level of distance as the player often controls more than one character in the course of the game. Often, to complete a quest or to battle through a level, the player directs another major character, adding dimension to the game. Besides the added game play benefit of new abilities, the donning of another persona allows the player another dimension of understanding in the wider scope of the game. As in a theatre production, the player – or actor – takes on the character and must change his/her responses in relation to the role he/she is playing.
Importantly, this assumption of character is not a complete transformation. Instead, the player/actor is following Brecht’s direction to performers, adopting a socially critical attitude and remaining distant from the emotional empathy associated with traditional acting. In *FFVII* after Cloud’s mysterious disappearance in chapter 4, the player controls Cid and later Tifa as the party journeys from location to location. This shift from character to character ensures the player’s distance from the experience although it does not detract from the emotional engagement with the narrative. Instead, the player is motivated by concern for Cloud while controlling other characters, continuing the game to allow for a reunion. The game finishes with the player in control of Cloud so the association with a single character is complete.

Finally, Epic Theatre and the RPG are related by their ability to arouse action in the spectator. Brecht sought to engage the audience, encouraging the audience to make decisions about the action rather than simply reacting to visual spectacle. For Brecht, the spectator’s connection to narrative was intellectual, witnessing the events onstage. This awareness results in a reasoned response that forces the audience to actively decide upon their response to the performance rather than being swept along in the emotional release of Aristotelian catharsis. The RPG relies upon the player’s engagement since the game is unable to progress without a physical (the act of playing the game requires the active manipulation of the controller) and intellectual commitment to playing.

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37 Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic* 137-39. From *A Short Description of a New Technique of Acting*. Brecht’s description of acting also calls for much emphasis to be placed on gesture. It is interesting to note that the creation of character gesture in the console RPG generally is limited to a small number of physical behaviors that are repeated randomly at various points in the game. For example, at the end of every battle, the characters use a gesture and/or a spoken phrase to indicate their pleasure at being victorious. This distillation of character into a stock series of gestures would also seem to fit Brecht’s model of acting in a detached fashion.
The difference between this kind of engagement and the hand-eye coordination of
the 3\textsuperscript{rd} person action genre is that with the RPG the player is focused on making choices
that potentially alter the narrative, while the 3\textsuperscript{rd} person action player is focused on
kinesthetic responses to complete a predetermined narrative path. For example, in \textit{Tomb Raider} the player exists moment to moment, fighting off beasts to find the treasure.
Choices in the game result in success or failure – not a shift within the narrative. Lara
Croft is single-minded, always seeking her piece of treasure. The occasional puzzle
solving does not indicate choice in this genre but instead is another obstacle in obtaining
valuables that never change over the course of the game. In contrast, the RPG player
engages in limited conversations, selecting from a list of responses, to gain information
and/or aid from various other characters. The selected response influences the game
sometimes on a large scale, sometimes limited to the moment. For example, in \textit{FFVII}
Cloud engages in multiple conversations with Aeris, Tifa, Yuffie, and Barret over the
course of the game. Some of those conversations accumulate ‘points’ that determine a
later scene in the Gold Saucer area where Cloud takes one of his female companions on a
‘date,’ shifting the character relationships in the game. The player is not initially aware
of this, instead focusing on making responses that fit their understanding of the game at
that time. Other decisions can influence the sequence of events within the narrative,
allowing Cloud to recruit other characters to join in his quest. In particular, Cloud’s
initial meeting with Yuffie is not a predetermined successful recruitment point. If his
answers to her questions do not meet with her satisfaction, Yuffie robs Cloud and
disappears leaving a time gap where a valuable character is not available to the player.
This level of choice situates the player in a position of responsibility for his/her actions. Rather than simply resulting in success or failure, the player’s decisions are integral to the development of the narrative. In *FFVII*, this development adds to the enjoyment of the game, shifting minor plot points and allows for variations in the player’s perception of the narrative. Throughout the course of the game in addition to influencing the narrative, the player is continually forced to make decisions, even while fighting, requiring reason rather than emotion to result in a successful outcome. For example, upon entering a location that requires the player to complete a quest, the player potentially creates the party of fighters that will enter the ‘dungeon’ and do battle. That decision requires reasoning based on an understanding of various character strengths and weaknesses to create a group that will function well in the upcoming challenges. Once decided, the player guides the band through the ‘dungeon’ battling various enemies. In battle, the player is repeatedly called upon to strategically use the assembled characters’ skills and abilities to beat the changing villains. In the 3rd person action genre, the player is focused on playing one character in a reactive state, avoiding monsters and leaping across pits to find treasure. In the RPG, the player manages a band of characters that must work cooperatively to survive while also remembering what locations yielded clues, which NPCs have been spoken to, and what quests remain to further character development and experience. To effectively play an RPG, the player must be logical, continually making decisions that are intellectually rather than emotionally motivated as well as fully cognizant of the governing rules of the game’s reality (i.e. when attacking a creature made of fire energy, only ice will damage it while fire will cause it to grow stronger).
RPGs that are more recent appear to be even more strongly linked to Epic structure. In Figure 3.10 and 3.11, two recent RPG structures are mapped to show two possible approaches to Brecht’s modular narrative. The first, *Suikoden III* (2002), is a narrative with three main characters: Geddoe, Hugo, and Chris. The player will assume all three characters in an episodic quest that can be explored in a nonlinear fashion. From the beginning, the player selects the first character to play. From that point, the player completes the first chapter of that character’s narrative. Once complete, the player can opt to continue that character’s narrative or to begin another character’s story. Each of the three characters has three episodes before the narrative converges in a major plot point. From there, the player continues to control all three characters but the engagement is dictated by the choice made in the key moment. Additionally, there are two other characters that the player can assume, Thomas and Kuroku, to further the narrative. What is particularly interesting in this structure is the assumption of character creating awareness within the player. In playing Geddoe, the player assumes the identity of an adult male mercenary with hidden motives and economic motivations. With Hugo, the player becomes a youthful male heavily influenced by his emotions. Finally, Chris represents a mature female motivated by honor and social responsibility. Each represents a warring faction of the world and the story reflects the struggle of each individual in relation to the larger social context that surrounds them. Structurally, the assumption of these disparate identities allows the player to become rationally engaged as well as emotionally intrigued with the narrative. Additionally, the episodes collide so the player experiences certain moments from multiple perspectives, gaining a stronger understanding of the whole through the separate pieces of the story. The player’s
The order for the main portion of the game is determined by the player - as indicated, you can choose chapters following a character's story from beginning to end or you can piece together the story bit by bit...

Figure 3.10: Suikoden III Structure Map
capacity for action is also continually prodded by the different interactions possible as the three main characters attempt to recruit 108 characters to their cause by the finish of the game. Much of the recruitment success or failure depends on the player’s actions in the game, which then influences the outcome of various battles and the ability to complete the game.

Figure 3.11 represents a diagram of the latest RPG of the Final Fantasy series.\textsuperscript{38} Final Fantasy X2 (2003) offers another multi-scene Epic structure with three female main characters, The Gullwings: Yuna, Rikku, and Paine. These women are a treasure-hunting trio that roams the world of the game, Spira, in search of spheres (objects that contain glimpses of Spira’s past as well as various treasures). After the initial entry into the game, the entire world of Spira is open for exploration. The player has virtually no sense of linear structure as the game unfolds, mission by mission. The ending of the game is determined by the percentage of the story that is revealed or completed in the course of play. The story percentage is based on how many times certain locations are visited, conversations with NPCs, and the discovery of various spheres. The player could effectively complete the game with only 70% of the story revealed, triggering a different ending from a 100% completion rate. The disclosure of the story is an interpretation of the Brechtian montage. Using cut scenes, the narrative is revealed in pieces in a mish-mash order, which is dependent on the player’s actions. This parsing of information opens the narrative but is not imperative to advance it in most cases. Also, the player is

\textsuperscript{38} This game is unique in the Final Fantasy series. It is a direct sequel to Final Fantasy X unlike other games in the series which utilize similar playing structures and aesthetics. Additionally, the use of a three person party that never changes is also unique as most Final Fantasy games have at least four main characters if not more. The use of three women is also noteworthy as a departure from most RPGs in which at least one of the main characters is a young male – although the references to Tidus from Final Fantasy X provide that connection.
Game opens with all locations open…

- Mission based exploration of the world
- 5 main breaks in the action propelled by visiting certain locations in each ‘Chapter’
  (but player does not know what will be encountered or missed along the way…)
- Only 3 playable characters - all female
- Abilities change in battle with change in dress…
- Ending depends on story % completion which can only be gained by experiencing several events in multiple locations

Mission based exploration of the world
5 main breaks in the action propelled by visiting certain locations in each ‘Chapter’
(but player does not know what will be encountered or missed along the way…)
Only 3 playable characters - all female
Abilities change in battle with change in dress…
Ending depends on story % completion which can only be gained by experiencing several events in multiple locations

Figure 3.11: Final Fantasy X-2 Structure Map
pushed for greater responsibility in his/her decision making, acknowledging the potential shift in the story dependant on choices made throughout the game. The game assumes that the player is aware of the story of the previous game, *Final Fantasy X*, which jumpstarts the narrative. Within this structure, Spira, the world of the game holds immense importance as another character in the game. The social world that was established in FFX is utilized in this game, but as a world in the process of rebuilding itself. The result is a political upheaval that forces the player to assume not only character identity but also alignment with a political and social agenda about a quarter of the way through the game. This alignment is then reflected in the behavior of NPCs and monsters in the game, aiding and/or impeding the progress of the Gullwings in various missions. The environment and its inhabitants provide commentary on the behavior and choices of the player much as Brecht sought to do in his use of alienation techniques.

**Forum Theatre and the MMORPG: Boal enters Norrath**

In the 1960’s, political activist and creative artist Augusto Boal confronted the traditional theatre by focusing on developing performance pieces that challenged the status quo through direct interaction with the audience. Rejecting the conventions of Aristotle and Brecht, Boal sought to actively engage a spectator’s capacity for action, creating theatre, which was interactive, progressive, and revolutionary. Working with the disenfranchised communities of various South American countries (Brazil and Chile in particular), Boal shaped interactive performance that addressed the concerns of ordinary people, moving the concept of narrative beyond the Aristotelian and Epic traditions. Using short scripts to create open dialogues, Boal did not create traditional performance
pieces. Instead, his staged actions lead to an open forum of debate and dialogue, which Boal describes in the following:

In Forum Theatre at no time should an idea be imposed. Forum Theatre does not preach, it is not dogmatic, it does not seek to manipulate people. At best, it liberates the spect-actors. At best, it stimulates them. At best, it transforms them into actors. Actor - he or she who acts.39

In creating Forum Theatre, Boal begins the theatrical experience with a script that poses a problem known to the community. Actors perform the script to the audience, playing the scene to a crisis point. The actors then encourage the spectators to become active, taking on the roles of the characters to explore possible resolutions for the shared concern. By engaging the spectator as actor, the audience becomes active in rehearsing their communal dilemma, hopefully finding a new means of resolving the issue through dramatic dialogue. Beginning with a scenario and ending with an improvisation, Boal’s concept of Forum Theatre allows actors and audience to communicate and give testimony about the world around them.

Jailed, tortured, and exiled for his politically motivated performances, Boal sought to articulate this experience in a manifesto that could provide guidance for the theatre of revolution. The resulting work, Theatre of the Oppressed, positions theatre as tool of liberation that must be reclaimed from those in power by the working class. By erasing the conventional boundary between spectator and actor – one who observes versus one who acts – Boal felt that theatre could be a means of engaging in discourse that challenged the conventional social and political norms. The elimination of a passive spectator is intimately linked to Boal’s refutation of Aristotle’s concept of catharsis. The

linear structure of traditional drama focuses on creating an emotional release that leaves the viewer purged and *intimidated*\textsuperscript{40} by the play’s end rather than inciting in the audience a state of excitement and energy that renders them capable of taking action. Boal breaks down this linear drama into three stages of action, followed by a catharsis. He rejects the term climax for action but instead uses catastrophe to emphasize the intimidation and fear created within the spectator.\textsuperscript{41} In addition to Aristotle, Boal examined Brecht and found the Marxist ideologies behind Epic Theatre to be appropriate for encouraging the energy of learning and challenging the status quo. Yet, the tactics of alienation employed by Brecht were incapable of engaging audiences on the kinesthetic and dialogical level sought by Boal. His reduction of Brecht interprets the treatment of the individual as a puppet of society rather than a being capable of change and free thought. This is problematic for Boal, reducing characters to objects and removing their humanity.\textsuperscript{42} Aristotle’s Dramatic focuses on catharsis and response while Brecht’s Epic demands knowledge and action, yet neither can accomplish liberation and revolution as Boal envisions it.\textsuperscript{43}

\textsuperscript{40} Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, trans. Charles A. McBride and Maria-Odilia Leal McBride (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1985) 25, Boal presents the word intimidation as linked with purgation and catharsis. Intimidation is particular for Boal as it implies the political nature of drama as a means of manipulating the polis.

\textsuperscript{41} Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* 37. According to Boal, Aristotelian tragedy focuses on terrifying the spectator through the spectacle inherent in climax or catastrophe of the action.

\textsuperscript{42} Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* 92-94. Boal presents this interpretation of Brecht in relation to Hegel and the question of character/subject.

\textsuperscript{43} Boal continues to create theatre, even treating an election as a performance opportunity. In 1992 he ran for the position of political office in Rio and won. This furthered his exploration of Forum Theatre as he utilized his theories to maintain an awareness of neighborhood issues and to discuss legislative issues within the community.
Such a transformation creates the *spect-actor*. A meld of audience and actor, Boal’s creation becomes an active participant in drama, influencing the narrative and altering it to suit the individual’s ideas. Figure 3.12 recreates Boal’s four-stage outline that systematizes the transformation of spectator into actor as it is presented in *Theatre of the Oppressed*. The first and second stage stages focus on the body and its relation to the performer. To liberate and transform spectator and performer, he proposes several techniques (which he calls games) to free actors from conventional performance methods. The third stage, the theater as language, positions narrative structure for Boal. Here the spectator and performer engage in three degrees of ‘writing’: Simultaneous Dramaturgy, Image Theatre, and Forum Theatre. In each, the audience joins in the creative process, redesigning the scenario to fit the needs of the community. Finally, discourse, the fourth stage, is the ultimate goal in Boal’s work, allowing actors and audience the opportunity for revolution through dramatic dialogue and physicalization.

As the final step before achieving discourse, Forum Theatre is a crossroads between narrative and action, spectator and performer. This degree of engagement will ultimately allow spectators to participate in dialogues and debates that can alter their place in the status quo. In *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* Boal provides the guidelines necessary for creating Forum Theatre. Initially, Boal describes this kind of performance as “a sort of fight or game” which is dependent on a basic rule structure that facilitates discussion and connects the participants. Boal’s most famous example of this

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44 Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* 126.
45 These are presented in detail in *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* (1992). This process will also be examined again in detail in Chapter 6 of this work.
First stage: Knowing the Body
a series of exercises by which one gets to know one’s body, its limitations and possibilities, its social distortions and possibilities of rehabilitation.

Second stage: Making the Body Expressive
a series of games by which one begins to express one’s self through the body, abandoning other, more common and habitual forms of expression.

Third stage: The theater as language
one begins to practice theater as a language that is living and present, not as a finished product displaying images from the past.

First degree: Simultaneous dramaturgy
the spectators “write” simultaneously with the acting of the actors;

Second degree: Image theater
the spectators intervene directly “speaking” through images made with the actors’ bodies;

Third degree: Forum theater
the spectators intervene directly in the dramatic action and act.

Fourth stage: The theater as discourse
simple forms in which the spectator-actor creates “spectacles” according to his need to discuss certain themes or rehearse certain actions.

Examples:
1. Newspaper theater
2. Invisible theater
3. Photo-romance theater
4. Breaking of repression
5. Myth theater
6. Trial theater
7. Masks and Rituals

Figure 3.12: Boal’s systematized transformation from spectator to actor
is a performance given in Godrano, Italy in 1997. Boal describes two instances of Forum Theatre that took place here, one focusing on the role of women in the social structure and the other concerned the local shepherds and their need to form a cooperative to survive in the economic market. In both, the basic structure of the theatrical experience began with an examination of the initial problem. Breaking the problem into dramatic action, the actors perform this scenario. The Forum followed this, encouraging the participation of the spectators. The townspeople came forward to the stage space and played the roles themselves. The resulting reworked ‘scenes’ explore possible changes in the action. The end result was a lengthy theatrical democracy in which all spectators became performers – achieving a kind of equality through their role-playing. In other words, this kind of theatre provides a forum, a place for open debate and dialogue regardless of class, gender, or other marginalizing factors. This open debate could last far beyond the normal ‘time’ for a performance, stretching well into the early hours of the morning as the participants became wrapped up in the dialogues. With no set ending, the length of the ‘game’ is dependent on the spect-actors, continuing as long as the performers are willing to play.

Forum Theater suggests a structural outline that parallels the game genre known as massive, multi-player online role-playing games (MMORPGs). Figure 3.13 shows the connections between Boal’s ‘rules’ of Forum Theatre and the basic structure of the MMORPG creating an initial frame for discussion. His breakdown of the rules focuses on three categories: dramaturgy, staging, and the performance game. Within these three elements, the MMORPG is more connected to dramaturgy and performance than the

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### The Rules of the Game

#### Forum Theatre - Boal

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DRAMATURGY</th>
<th>MMORPG structure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Clear delination of character in text / easily recognizable ideologies</td>
<td>DRAMATURGY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Original Play - must contain social 'error' or political concern - failure model</td>
<td>1. Focus on character development as initial entry into the game</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. No limitations on genre</td>
<td>2. Common use of cut scene to establish the world of the game and to set-up premise for social/political structures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. No limitations on genre - except those imposed by commercial taste</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STAGING</td>
<td>STAGING</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Must have a physical life to encourage audience participation that is representative of character</td>
<td>1. Limited physical presence but avatar is a 'creation' of the player - gestures limited at present but may change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Every show must find the most suitable means of expression for its particular subject</td>
<td>2. Suitable means is projected in the environment of the virtual world - mimics an imagined reality whether space or fantasy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Each character must be visually distinct and easy for the spectator to assume</td>
<td>3. Assumption of character is immediate and simple to discard in chat mode - always visually present once in world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PERFORMANCE GAME</td>
<td>PERFORMANCE GAME</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Show presents a certain image of the world</td>
<td>1. Game presents a certain image of a world - science fiction and fantasy can represent a modern problem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Spect-actors asked is agree with protagonist or not - awareness of repetition of scenarios</td>
<td>2. Upon entry choose social position and alliance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Spect-actor informed of his/her control over the drama in replacing the protagonist</td>
<td>3. After initial cut scene and guidance, the player is released into the 'world' to experience it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Spect-actor replaces character/actor in drama</td>
<td>4. As character develops, the player generates rather than responds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Improvisational response to the insertion of the spect-actor by remaining actors</td>
<td>5. Missions are based on loose frame of goals to be accomplished by player with aid of others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. If spect-actor removes self from scenario, the original actor replaces them - can then be replaced by another spectator. Continual attempt to solve problem.</td>
<td>6. Assumption of leadership role within the virtual world as opposed to waiting for aid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Control given over completely to spect-actors, breaking the oppression of the actors.</td>
<td>7. Once game rules are evident, gamers begin writing their own scenarios (mods)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Must have an actor that serves as Joker - wild card to lead the game - initial controller</td>
<td>8. Wild Card provided by software designers - addition of content and areas to explore shifts game experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Awareness of the solution achieved as limited to the surroundings and the individuals present</td>
<td>9. Game can only be experienced through cooperative play which is dependent on other gamers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Propose a model of action to then be played out</td>
<td>10. Virtual world creates an impact on the behavior in the real world - Economic and social impact beyond individual level</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Figure 3.13:** Boal’s Forum Theatre contrasted to MMORPG structure
traditional sense of staging. The elements of performance and dramaturgy as suggested
by Boal are incorporated into game play as explained within the chart. Staging is more
difficult to parallel as the player is limited by the lack of a physical presence online.
Replaced by an avatar, the performer joins a virtual community. The player controls the
avatar much as an actor controls his/her body onstage. The avatar provides the illusion of
locomotion in the fictional world of the game, providing a ‘costumed’ figure that
represents the actor in this online community.

The evolution of the massive multi-player online role-playing game is a blend of
the pencil and paper dungeons of the RPG tradition mixed with the first online gaming
communities. Unlike the console RPG titles, the use of the computer opened new
potentials for human interaction using the internet. Individuals are allowed to mingle
with other like-minded companions regardless of geographic location. With such
freedom, the gaming community began to explore the development of online worlds that
reflected console game genres. For first person shooters, the capabilities of massive
multi-player online worlds (MMOs) added a new level of adrenaline. Challenging and
outwitting another human as opposed to the artificial intelligence of the computer
increased the sense of ‘winning’ adding to player satisfaction. On the other hand, some
players sought to further the fantasy realms of traditional role-playing and formed
communities around text-based narratives.

Lacking visual components beyond text on a black screen, early online adventure
narratives were streams of text that allowed players to respond to textual prompts,
advancing the story line by line. These first worlds, known as MUDs (Multi-User
Dungeons), were early expansions of the Dungeons and Dragons experience; extending
story beyond the small groupings of players clustered around coffee tables. In addition, these communities allowed a sense of interaction outside the normal social sphere, appealing to the early aficionados of technology and the traditional ‘geeks’ of fantasy role-playing. By the late 1990’s, the massive multiplayer genre was well entrenched in computer gaming traditions and is continually being lauded as the future of gaming.\textsuperscript{48}

The nature of the online gaming experience is defined by genre. The addition of the role-playing (RPG) element to the traditional virtual killing ground removes the linear, violent objective of the ‘kill’ or ‘be killed’ tradition of \textit{Unreal Tournament}, \textit{Doom}, and other online FPS games. Instead, the focus of the game becomes \textit{situational}; a simulacrum of the ‘real’ world, albeit in a sometimes fantastical setting. This online community equates to the real community of the Forum Theatre in which issues are explored that relate directly to the audience. Figure 3.14 pinpoints three main parallels between Forum Theatre and MMORPGs: a clearly defined social world with existing parameters, the creation and assumption of character by a spectator, and a narrative transformed by the intervention of a spect-actor. Using the online community of \textit{Everquest} as a reference, the following discussion will connect Boal’s proactive, politically motivated performance with the fantastical world of online gaming.

\textit{Everquest} was released in February of 1999 and is one of the primary MMORPGs that remain popular and thriving.\textsuperscript{49} \textit{Everquest} enhanced the existing formula by

\textsuperscript{48} The concept of MMO being the future of gaming reflects the current shift to allow the console to be online and to participate in the massive multiplayer experience. Sony and Microsoft have already taken the PlayStation2 and the Xbox consoles online with Nintendo’s Game Cube projected to follow in the near future. The current demand from gamers seems to be grounded in expectations of connectivity following an assumption of better game play resulting in human interaction regardless of game genre.

\textsuperscript{49} \textit{Ultima Online} is the equal to \textit{Everquest} in relation to impact and popularity in the MMORPG community. Its history and impact on the genre is undeniable. My decision to use \textit{Everquest} for this
improving graphics (the game required a 3D accelerator), adding more action elements to allow for scripted experience alongside player-generated missions, the concept of group questing which forces interaction amongst gamers, and a visually rich, detailed community. Considered one of the most popular MMOs of all time, *Everquest* remains a driving force in online gaming with multiple world expansion packs and a PlayStation2 console version. *Everquest II* is due for release in June of 2004. Housing the game, the world of Norrath is an economic, social, and political world that demands active engagement from the player. Figure 3.15 suggests the basic structure of the game although the actual scope of game play is too broad and too changeable to be limited to a single graphic representation. This diagram represents the initial entry into the game and inquiry is due to the fact that the game has only existed as a MMORPG while the *Ultima* series had a tradition of being a computer RPG long before it went online in 1999.
Creation of character
Selection of:
Name
Gender
Race
Class
Alignment
Skills
Religion
15 playable races - race determines starting city (initial entry point in the game)

Interaction Possibilities
begin immediately
Dialogue is the only means of engagement and advancement

Entry into Norrath
Initial Quest - Find your character's guild and get 1st mission

Within the Everquest world the following realms exist for exploration and communication:
- Antonica
- Faydwer
- Odus
- Velious
- Kunark

Character Type I
NPCs (Boal's actors) generate situations and provide information

Character Type II
Player Characters (spect-actors) Other humans playing the game in remote locations

Character Type III
Monsters/mobs another form of NPC but exists purely to kill or be killed - serves to level-up characters

Figure 3.15: Everquest Structure Map
shows the choices for interaction available within the game by labeling character types as well as indicating the five realms open for exploration. As the game is open-ended, the player develops the plot over the course of his/her game.

The first structural similarity between *Everquest* and Boal is a clearly defined world with existing social parameters. Those social parameters exist on two levels – the social reality dictated by the technical nature of game play and the fictional world of the game. The social reality, dictated by the technical requirements to play *Everquest*, exists in a larger frame beyond the fictional development of the world of Norrath. To play the game, one must join an online community and follow various rules and pathways to access the fictional (virtual) world of Norrath. Much like the ‘rules’ an audience member observes to attend a show, a player of *Everquest* must follow certain guidelines to even enter the game. The complexity of these rules generates a social circle, absorbed in the playing of *Everquest* as much as the playing of the character. This larger frame creates a kinship among players who may never have encountered one another online but that can immediately find common ground in discussing the game. This sense of community is crucial to relating the MMORPG to Boal as a community is necessary for the creation of the Forum. As a public community, *Everquest* allows a gathering ground for this population – a ‘geek’ clan of individuals collected from multiple ethnicities and traditional societal groupings.50

50 In relation to the other genres discussed in this chapter, this type of game is both the most and the least theatrical. It allows for a complete assumption of character while also allowing a means for social gathering and discussion depending on the player’s mood. For many players, playing *Everquest* is a purely social experience, allowing him/her to meet with a group of friends online, to hunt monsters, and to chat about his/her ‘real’ life while playing. For others, the role-play dimension becomes critical to the game experience. For this player, the essence of the game is playing the role, allowing an escape from his/her ‘real’ identity to become his/her ideal in the fantastical world of Norrath where the individual determines his/her race, gender, class, etc. For yet another group of players, game play varies between the two,
Aside from the social reality, the fictional world of Norrath is a fantasy realm with inherent cultural and political boundaries established by the race and class of the characters. With the 1999 release of the game, the playable races numbered fourteen (the fifteenth race of the lizard-like Iskar was added in the expansion, *Ruins of Kunark*) and spanned five continents to create a vast ‘unexplored’ world. Each race is briefly defined in an accompanying handbook, which also indicates preexisting racial tensions. In addition to the fifteen racial groups, the class structure within the game is determined by job choice rather than economic status. The job classifications include bards, clerics, thieves, and warriors creating a matrix structure of fifteen jobs (the Beastlord class was added with the expansion, *Shadows of Luclin*). Each race is limited to particular classes due to the inherent skills connected to the species. Within certain job classes, guilds exist to provide the rules and regulations particular to that class such as the Thieves Guild. This type of guild is known as a game-operated guild, developed by designers to fit certain parameters and to generate specific storylines within the game. Players can also operate and maintain guilds as a means of furthering cooperation and generating new missions to build experience and gain money for their characters. All player characters speak a Common Tongue language, which allows open communication. However, the player has the option of speaking a native language dependant on the race of the character that appears as gibberish to all except members of that race. Additionally, the world

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51 There is a server (the Firiona Vie server) that does not use Common and is limited to only native race language. Part of the game play is spent learning other languages.
has an established religious structure with eighteen specific deities as well as several sub-deities that influence character development and narrative progression.

Economically, the world of Norrath exists in a capitalist society in which all objects hold some monetary value. Players loot the bodies of slain enemies to gather items, armor, and weapons. The loot is then redistributed for use by the player or sold for money, which is incrementally broken down as follows: 1 platinum = 10 gold = 100 silver = 1000 copper.\(^{52}\) Finally, the ‘history’ of Norrath is widely published online and is included in part in the handbooks that accompany the software. Also with the growth of the game, the development of fan fiction has contributed to the large number of websites devoted to the particulars of *Everquest* politics, history, and religion. All of these factors are discovered by the character in the course of game play, creating a sense of discovery that is motivated by the role-playing aspect of the game.

Both the mechanics of game play and the fictional world of Norrath are communicated to the player prior to beginning the game. This defined social world is an ideal place for the Forum where debate and dialogue can be generated. With its economic, religious, political, and social foundations, Norrath is a complete virtual world. Although that community is unable to gather in a physical location, the online world, complete with avatars to mimic the physical presence, allows for the gathering needed to generate performance.

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\(^{52}\) On a side note, the economic community of *Everquest* has a real-world equivalent on EBay and other online vendors allowing players to buy and sell skills, items, and more for ‘real’ money rather than spending the time within the game exploring for treasure and enemies. A player finds or wins items in the course of the game. He/she can post notices in guilds and the Bazaar specifying what items he/she is interested in selling. The actual sale takes place online using EBay or other retail outlets. The seller specifies an amount in *Everquest* currency, platinum, and translates that to dollars. The actual purchase occurs outside the game world as seller and buyer exchange credit card information. Once purchased, the item is then delivered to the buyer in the Bazaar in Norrath. The resulting transactions have propelled the fictional economy of Norrath into our real-world economy.
The second corollary between Boal and MMORPG is the assumption of character by the spectator. In this type of game, the player generates the character from the initial entry into the game. There is no preset identity to assume, no Lara Croft to play. Instead, the player creates his/her identity with the guidelines presented by the game. Much as the scenario presented in Boal’s Forum, the player is introduced to the game in a short animated scene outlining the general basics of the community. The player, following the impetus of this cut scene, determines his/her role within the community by selecting various character parameters such as race, religion, class, etc. These parameters are combined, allowing the player to develop a virtual persona that is something ‘other’ than him/her represented onscreen. The player is forced out of the passivity of the spectator and enrolls in the action, creating a character to join in the ongoing narrative of the online world. Role-play is immediate and the formation of the character is left to the player. Yet, he/she is still bound by social rules, stepping into a formed identity that is constrained by the choices of race, class, and religion available within the Norrath community. In contrast to other games in which the player aligns him/herself to a stable, pre-defined character such as Cloud in *FFVII*, the player in the MMORPG is determining an identity that is unique in the game with no set path. That character is a reflection of the identity the player wants to explore – male/female, good/evil, religious/atheist, etc. Likewise, in Forum Theatre, the shepherds can play their bosses or the women can play the patriarchs.

Upon deciding to play *Everquest* the player begins to build his/her character through a series of steps. Initially, the player selects a gender for the character. Then, the player selects the race of the character, which determines some initial, conflicts as well as
which classes will be available to the character. For example, the selection of Dark Elf for a character’s race automatically generates racial tension with Barbarians, Erudites, Half Elves, High Elves, Humans, Iskar, and Wood Elves while limiting the jobs available to Cleric, Enchanter, Magician, Necromancer, Rogue, Shadow Knight, Warrior, and Wizard. Additionally, the initial entry into Norrath is determined by race, with the player automatically beginning in the home city for that race (for the Dark Elves, the starting city is Neriak). With the selection of race and class, the player then decides how to develop the various abilities of the character ranging from Charisma to Intelligence to Strength as well as others. With that matrix finished, the player selects a facial appearance for the character as well as a name. Finally, the player determines the character’s religious preferences deciding which, if any, deities the character worships.

The player’s ability to create the character with the guidelines of the game seems in keeping with Boal’s attempt to create characters that the spectator can readily identify with and recognize. Although fantastical in nature these characters require an investment in the creation process, forcing the player to take an active role in the creation of the character that he/she will play in the game. No longer replacing an actor, the player is replacing his/her self, developing an avatar that will stand for him/her in the virtual world. The player’s personality is present to some degree and even creates a ‘mask’ in the visual representation of the avatar. By allowing choice not only in race and class but also in gender and facial appearance, the character is a direct reflection of the player’s tastes and psyche. In addition, once the initial creation phase is complete, the player easily assumes the trappings of the role simply by entering the chosen server and the joining the game. The avatar is easily recognizable as the individual, carrying the name
and physical appearance chosen by the player. For Boal, this would seem an ideal bridge for immediate entry into the Forum, undeterred by the need for donning a physical costume or persona.

Finally, the third connection between Boal and the MMORPG is the development of story through the direct intervention of the spect-actor. Boal pointed to the connection of narrative and spect-actor as a physical assumption of character in which the spectator took over a role and changed the narrative by replaying the scenario to achieve possible solutions. *Everquest* builds on this idea, with the framework of traditional dungeon exploration as the base. The spectator or player assumes a character he/she creates. This is not the replacement of Boal’s actor but instead a construct of existing rules that creates an avatar for the player that holds a separate name allowing it to be called a character. This character – ‘played’ by the game player – enters a defined social world. The narrative frame in Boal’s theatre finds a parallel existence in *Everquest* as missions – explorations of the world with specific goals – that can succeed or fail depending on the player’s abilities as a solo character and, more importantly, on the player’s abilities to gather a group of players to tackle the mission.

In the *Everquest* community, the emphasis on player participation is vital to progressing in the game. To develop one’s character, the player must participate in quests and missions, killing enemies and discovering treasure to accumulate experience points (which are added the attribute matrix) and gain items for use and/or sale. Players have direct impact on the game in multiple ways. As previously mentioned, the concept of guilds as connected to various classes is split between game operated and player driven. Both allow missions to help characters develop, but those created and run by
players extend the initial guidelines of those made by the game designers, continually adding to the content of the game. The expansion *Lost Dungeons of Norrath (2004)* provides a new means for player impact on the narrative as follows:

*Lost Dungeons* introduces "instancing," a term for creating private adventure spaces on the fly for groups of players. These instanced adventures are timed and include a specific goal, such as rescue an NPC, assassinate a named character, collect a number of items, etc.\(^{53}\)

In experiencing the game with the pre-established missions developed by the game designers, the player is following a scenario. With ‘instancing’, the player assumes control of the scenario, changing it to his/her specifications. In Boal’s Forum Theatre ‘instancing’, is what draws spect-actors to play out their own ideas once they have been exposed to the actors’ initial performance.

In addition, the players predominantly drive the economy of Norrath, as it is the onus of the player to gather items and platinum for use in the Bazaar. In mimicry of modern capitalist society, the players with the most platinum and items are the most powerful characters, encouraging the continual development of quests that allow players to develop their characters to the highest level. Both players and game designers fulfill this demand for new content. The players contribute by developing new quests while game designers are continually developing new content for the game. This new content is generally packaged as an expansion, adding to the existing community. With each expansion, more material is added to the online world, reshaping it and introducing new variables for the players to use in their quests.

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The MMORPG is continually developing and, for some game theorists, represents the pinnacle of interactive experience in which the player is forced into an active relationship with cultural, political, social, and economic models. As Boal seeks to ‘rehearse revolution’, the MMORPG seeks to ‘rehearse life’ – be it of fantastical nature as in *Everquest* or truly a simulacrum of the real as in *The SIMS*. Players can explore their fantasies by becoming hero or villain.

What sets MMOs apart from other games are their social structures and communities. If you just want to kill things and level up a character, you can play Diablo. If you just want to wander in a 3D world, you can play *Morrowind*. If you're simply interested in fantasy or sci-fi, there are accomplished narratives like the *Baldur's Gate* series or *Knights of the Old Republic*. But what those games can't offer is a role in the complex and evolving set of living social structures. In MMOs, you'll find guilds, role-playing servers, warring factions, economic classes, crime rings, griefers, political groups, and even entire cities and nations.¹⁴

Massive multiplayer games are unique in that they depend upon the community to survive, just as Boal’s Forum relies on society to thrive. The community is the reason to play the game as its presence and involvement alters the experience. The player becomes a part of the game and its virtual community, joining a social network that gives the player agency, a capacity for change in every action and choice.

The Forum theatre attempts to solve a community problem. The online community of the MMORPGs does the same thing within its own fictional worlds. The economic collective of the shepherds in Boal’s Forum could be simulated in an online community, testing its viability and success while the role of women could be explored by having men and women reverse genders in the online community. In relation to this, it is important to mention the impact of *The SIMS* as both a strategy game and its

MMORPG component *The SIMS Online*. This game has altered the manner in which players view user-driven stories and content. Much as the spect-actors created by Boal in Godrano played the character of the oppressor, the players of *The SIMS* become workers in a virtual community that can rise or fall in power depending on their actions. In *The SIMS Online*, the player builds his/her online avatar and enters a reality that reflects *modern society*, not a fantasy realm. The player must get a job, earn money, build a home, and develop relationships in an eerie mimicry of reality. Noticeable for the absence of battles and monsters, the experience of playing *The SIMS Online* is like struggling to live life a day at a time. Users create objects for sale to spruce up homes and lawns. They create businesses to generate income. Certain members of the virtual world even create protection rackets and virtual brothels where violence and sex are avenues to money and power.\(^5^5\)

A question remains as to the absence of a political agenda so essential to Augusto Boal’s Forum Theatre. Can the social relevance of these virtual communities be determined? The continual popularity of games like *Everquest* and the declining sales of *The SIMs Online*\(^5^6\) suggest that real world politics cannot survive online. Instead, the political dimension must be cloaked in swords, spaceships, and aliens. Mark Asher, a

\(^{55}\) It is interesting to note that in *The SIMS*, the game prohibits the visualization of such violent acts. There is no actual sex in the game, just a transaction, and the suggestion of such behavior.

\(^{56}\) The online version of the game has been less successful than its single-player counterpart, *The SIMs*. In fact, *The SIMs* and its multiple expansion packs remain popular with *The SIMs II* due for release in 2004. Part of this popularity might be located in the control aspect of the single player game in which the player is the ultimate controller within the game, focused on the individual life rather than the larger communal faction. With the same basic game rules for both games, the other possible explanation for the lack of performance in the online version is the time commitment required to ‘win’ the game. In the single player version, the player is free to play as his/her time permits. In the online world, the community expectations require an amount of continual game play to generate income and to serve as a present member of the community.
Imagine this: you're taking the bus in to class, or to work, when you get a message on your cell phone. It's from your guild leader online: he warns of an attack on your stronghold that night. Over the next few minutes you punch some buttons to order your online minions to pack up and move within the castle walls. At lunch that day, you log into the web to check on the status of the game-world, read a few messages from your fellow players, and verify on a live interactive map that the enemy is indeed closing in. The city's governor has requested permission to dip into the emergency magical weapons, and as a citizen you vote 'yes' from the web browser. You set your cell phone to notify you when the attack starts, and all through dinner you're planning strategy in your head in anticipation of the evening's play.\textsuperscript{57}

As technology continues to improve and becomes further enmeshed in everyday life, the potential grows for gaming to extend its presence. This connection between life and gaming will further Boal's concept of the Forum by providing a place for the exploration of ideas and narratives. With the integration of computers and cell phones, virtual worlds hold the potential to become active theatrical forums in which individuals become characters in ever-changing narratives that are influenced and shaped by the people.

\textsuperscript{57} Asher, "The MMOGs of 2003: The history of massively multiplayer online games."
CHAPTER 4

QUESTIONS OF CHARACTER

One of the main reasons games have been so emotionally shallow up to this point is that there hasn't really been anything in them worth empathizing with. We find it rather difficult to empathize with one-dimensional game characters that only have the ability to regurgitate canned speech and perform predictable actions. We know that they have no emotional depth, so we basically disengage that circuit in our brain and treat them more like appliances than people.¹

The concept of character remains one of the most important within theatrical experience. In the Poetics, Aristotle values the creation of character as second in his ranking of dramatic elements. As plot serves to imitate the action of life, characters are the necessary conduits by which an audience recognizes the actions being presented onstage.² These focused reflections of human emotion and action provide the entry point into plot while also generating an empathic connection that entices audiences to willingly suspend their disbelief and enter into the fictional world of dramatic storytelling. Playwrights create characters as mouthpieces to present ideas or as individuals that experience life from particular points of view, battered by the gods and fate, in conflict with themselves, the world around them, or with the cosmos itself. Actors discuss character in relation to the roles that they portray, finding objectives and obstacles in the individual stories. Designers visualize the world that characters inhabit as well as the


physical presence of the performer onstage, both visually and aurally. The director grasps the playwright’s constructs and provides them with physical bodies (actors) to bring a two-dimensional existence – on the page – into the three-dimensional world onstage. For the audience, characters provide access to the story, a means of identifying with the comic or tragic circumstances that reflect the real world within a theatrical microcosm. Theatrical characters evolve with each new performer, director, designer, and audience as theatre allows for new interpretations of characters, continually envisioning the playwright’s original text in ways unique to each production.

For games, character equals and, in some cases, surpasses plot as the primary means of capturing the imagination and interest of gamers.

Lara Croft. Mario. Sonic. Pac-Man. Earthworm Jim. Crash Bandicoot. Leisure Suit Larry. Duke Nukem. What do these words have in common? The answer is simple - all of them are household names. [...] These are video game heroes, the stars of the interactive screen whose marketing potential has kept them in the limelight for many years, and lined the pockets of their creators with green.³

The need for engaging and dynamic characters is paramount, forcing game designers and writers to explore varying means of developing roles in hopes of creating the next icon in video game history. The game design team serves as playwright and designer, creating the mental and physical shell, which will be inhabited by the gamer much like an actor, inhabits a character onstage.

**Foundations of Character**

The gamer exists in three levels of consciousness: 1. person, 2. player, and 3. character. As person, the gamer exists in a larger social context outside the world of the

game experience. As player, the gamer is aware of holding a controller and looking at a glass screen. As character, the gamer makes choices that determine the behavior of the avatar on screen, battling through monsters, conversing with other characters, and inhabiting the world of the game.\(^4\) The theatre performer likewise exists in this threefold entity: 1. person, 2. actor (player), and 3. character. As person, the performer is aware of the world at large which has created him/her as an individual in society. As actor, the performer is aware of playing a role following blocking, uttering lines, using props and the myriad technical accoutrement that are inherent in the acting process. As character, the performer becomes a part of the play, transforming him/herself to be something outside his/her nature, inhabiting the stage reality. This trifold existence can also be envisioned in another way as seen in Brian Rotman’s exploration of the mathematical sign. For Rotman, the individual evidences a tripartite consciousness – person, subject, and agent – each with a particular activity. Delving into semiotics, Rotman explains the relationship between the three:

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[...] \text{the Person (Dreamer awake) observes the Subject (Dreamer) imagining a proxy – the Agent (Imago) – of him- or herself, and on the basis of the likeness between Subject and Agent, comes to be persuaded that what the Agent experiences is what the Subject would experience were he or she to carry out the unidealized versions of the activities in question.}\]  

\[^4\] It must again be mentioned that if the player is using a guidebook, he/she might be making choices that can be considered as ‘informed.’ However, if that is the case, the player is still uncertain of how his/her choices impact the story. Instead, he/she is aware that in making the advised choice he/she will finish the game sooner or with more items – not how the story is impacted.

\[^5\] Brian Rotman, *Mathematics as Sign: Writing, Imagining, and Counting* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 2000) 52. This mathematical model also presents a triangular relationship between the Person (connected to metasigns), the Subject (connected to signs), and the Agent (connected to signifiers). These three are respectively linked to Rotman’s terms of Meta-Code, Code, and Virtual Code suggesting another correlation to games as the characters (agents) can be construed as manifestations of real code in a virtual environment.
In all versions – gaming, theatrical, and mathematical – the sense of creating character or action is determined by these three facets of the individual whether as gamer, performer, or person. However, there exists a difference between theatre and the game world. This disparity is created by the actor’s awareness of the full story and the capacity to make informed choices in portraying the character. The gamer has no such luxury unless he/she is playing the game for a second time. The actor has read the script before performing it. In contrast, the gamer is experiencing the story firsthand while playing. In performance, the actor generates the illusion of a first time experience while the gamer’s initial engagement is fresh. However, the player does undergo the repetition of actions much like an actor as he/she must replay moments in the game as characters die, forcing a repeat of the action.

As pointed out by Will Wright in the quote that began this chapter, the typical game character is a one-dimensional façade that is simply a mechanical tool of the game rather than an emotionally engaging entity. The design of the character in relation to appearance and motion supercedes the dramatic impulses that are the focus of playwriting. Character development, much like narrative structure, is often limited to a brief dossier that the player encounters in reading the game directions rather than in the context of game play. Alternatively, the character is created by the player, assembling a series of statistics and personality traits to create an entity that will live within the game world, driven by the motivations of the player rather than an existing back-story.

Surprisingly, many game design texts bypass or minimize the development of character as a dramatic element. Instead, game creators focus on the details of producing believable worlds that will surround the player. This reasoning suggests that if the world
is believable then the player will become involved in the action of playing the game rather than playing the character. Character is recognized as important but the concept of unfolding a character from a dramatic perspective is relegated to a simple sketch or outline. The focus of the game centers on visual design and viability. Rather than using theatre as a model, game designers tend to use film as the guide for any consideration of character. Chris Crawford identifies this as ‘Hollywood Envy’ and suggests that most game designers view the cinematic world as their nirvana. In using the Hollywood model, character design is heavily reliant on types, using stock characters that are readily identifiable as good or evil, powerful or weak. This formulaic approach requires a linear narrative to allow an audience/player to follow a character’s journey from beginning to end, hoping to achieve some degree of empathic response or connection. Yet the very mechanics of typical game play in story-dominated genres destroys this potential for empathy with the character as the player spends countless hours building experience and money (also known as leveling up). This tedious process has nothing to do with character development in a dramatic sense. As Crawford states:

In some ways, the emphasis on character development has impeded progress in storytelling with RPGs. The central premise of these games is that the player steadily builds his abilities by acquiring wealth, tools, weapons, and experience. This emphasis on character development tends to work against the needs of

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6 This is true in some genres such as puzzle games like Tetris or simple arcade games like Space Invaders. No character is necessary to further the game and the focus of play is on the concept of ‘winning’ rather than playing. This inquiry however is centered on the genres that are dependent on storytelling as a means of engaging the player.

7 Chris Crawford, Chris Crawford on Game Design (Indianapolis: New Riders, 2003) 182-83. Crawford points to this phenomenon as a potential avoidance of the ‘geek’ factor tied to the profession of computer programming and the hobby of gaming. Also, the Hollywood community is one of the most glorified in modern society which programmers and designers seek to enter by designing an award-winning game. This can be furthered by the current trend of games and comics (another ‘geek’ hobby) becoming one of the sources for films – Tomb Raider, Resident Evil, Mortal Kombat, Street Fighter, and so on.
dramatic development - dramatic twists and turns clash with the prevailing tone of steady advancement.⁸

With such an obvious imbalance between the dramatic and the technical character development, the cinematic approach fails to enhance the interactive nature of gaming.

Rejecting the visually fixated world of film as the natural parallel to games, David Freeman believes that linear media cannot be relied on to create emotionally engaging games. He lists the following factors as symptomatic of this linearity: “1. Always controlling the order of events. 2. Controlling the timing between events. 3. Creating characters with whom the audience identifies, who then undergo moving experiences.”⁹

These techniques of linear storytelling are ineffective in the interactive world of games. The tendency to rely on these false tools leads to a void in understanding how to create characters that can exist in a nonlinear narrative while remaining emotionally engaging. This void has in turn created what Freeman refers to as ‘accidental Buddhists’ in game design – writers and designers caught in the quandary of being unable to rely on the conventions of linear storytelling, unable to create characters that players will want to ‘play’ in the same sense of an actor wanting to ‘play’ a role.¹⁰

By using theatrical character analysis for game characters, it is possible to see what patterns emerge. This in turn opens avenues of inquiry into how such models might be improved to allow for a greater depth of emotional engagement and character depth. Such a consideration can

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⁸ Crawford, *Chris Crawford on Game Design* 163.


¹⁰ Freeman, *Creating Emotion in Games* 7-11. Freeman’s book is focused on how to craft emotion into games but avoids theatre as a referent, possibly due to his own background as a screenwriter and game designer.
also generate new models for creating characters that can exist in nonlinear narratives as well as traditional linear narratives associated with cinema.

**Dramatic Characters**

Within game design, there are three identifiable methods, or categories, of character creation in games. As identified by Neal and Jana Hallford in *Swords and Circuitry*, these can be labeled as 1) character generation, 2) class selection, and 3) foundlings. The first, character generation, is implemented in many RPGs and MMORPGs such as *Everquest*, *Neverwinter Nights*, and *Baldur’s Gate*. In this type of character creation, the player is led through a series of screens that force the player to select gender, occupation, character traits, political alliances, etc. as the game allows. The player is in complete control of the character, developing physical appearance and naming the avatar as well as determining strengths and weaknesses. The second category, class selection, gives the player a limited group of characters that have a predefined physical appearance and job occupation (also known as class). In addition to selecting the preset unit, the player can also name the character to allow for a more personal connection. This type of character is most commonly seen in massive multiplayer online games such as the *Diablo* or *Warcraft* series, which focus more on strategy than story. Unlike character generation, this type of character is more suitable to fighting actions than narrative development. Character depth for this type is limited. It is defined

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11 *Swords and Circuitry: A Designer's Guide to Computer Role-Playing Games*, Prima Tech's Game Development Series (Roseville, California: Prima, 2001) 77-78. Although the authors focus on RPG as the primary means of discussing gaming, these categories can be applied to other genres making them ideal for this broader discussion.
in most basic terms and play focuses on ‘leveling up’ the character’s skills. Some
dramatic development is possible but it is inadequate, as the game tends to focus on
moving from enemy to enemy, treasure to treasure. The final method – the foundling – is
common in most third person action and many console RPGs. Foundlings are so named
because they are discovered (or found) in the game as complete entities. These
characters are introduced to the player as a pre-formed entity with some degree of
background and existing characteristics. This type of character is similar to Cloud in
*Final Fantasy VII* or Lara Croft in *Tomb Raider*. The player takes on the role of an
existing fully developed character, discovering more about the identity and personality of
the character while playing the game.

The three types of character creation used in gaming have theatrical parallels as
well. For actors, the development of each character is unique to the demands of the
performance. So too, game characters reflect the distinctive demands of the individual
game. Viewed from a theatrical perspective, the character generation methods can be
seen as a mirror of dramatic improvisation. For an actor, creating a character in the midst
of an improvisational setting demands similar personal involvement from a gamer in
making a game character. The actor generates a character that fits within the constraints
of the improvisation but maintains the freedom of choice necessary to adapt to the fluid
evolution of the narrative, changing from moment to moment to best react within the
setting. Class selection, however, utilizes the process of stock characters as commonly

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12 The concept of ‘leveling up’ is dominant in most types of games that utilize character development. The character’s skills and experience are increased over time depending on the amount of tasks completed and/or enemies killed in the course of the game. Time-consuming and repetitive, this facet of character development is one of the most problematic in gaining a sense of playing the character – most often, the gamer becomes weary of constant battles and interest in the narrative and the character is sacrificed to the technical limitations of the form.
seen in theatre throughout history. One example of this tradition is the comic slapstick form of theatre known as *commedia dell’arte*. Actors performing in commedia pieces generally work within a scenario peopled with characters representing stereotypes of human foibles and follies – the miser, the braggart, the young lovers, the trickster servant, etc. Characters are identified by signature behavioral patterns reinforced by the use of mask and costume associated with a name. The actor is constrained by the stereotype (or stock behavior) of the character, similar to a gamer limited to playing a particular class (fighter, mage, rogue). The third type, the foundling, finds a parallel in traditional theatrical roles in fully developed scripts. Theatrically, the playwright defines these characters as intricate reflections of humanity. In the game, the characters are created by the designers and advance the narrative while usually fitting into a stereotype (the young hero, the mercenary, the good-hearted thief, etc.). The actor is separate from the character, performing the plot much like the gamer follows the foundling through the course of the game. This type of role utilizes a defined narrative with beginning, middle, and end. With these gaming examples in mind, I will turn to a theatrical model.

The theatrical model for examining character in this inquiry is based on the principles of textual analysis provided in James Thomas’s text *Script Analysis for Actors, Directors, and Designers*. Thomas draws on terminology that is considered common knowledge within theatrical practice. He provides eight headings for examining character including: objectives, dramatic action, conflicts, willpower, values, personality traits, complexity, and relationships. These terms provide a multi-faceted arena from which to scrutinize character. In this assessment, the genres of third person action, RPG, and MMORPG are once again the main focus. Instead of investigating each genre
independently, this chapter will examine each of Thomas’s character traits drawing parallels between the genres. As certain genres tend to rely heavily on particular focal points, the inevitable result has been the one-dimensional characters that Wright identifies as common in the game market. To create empathic connections with game characters, structural strengths and weaknesses must be identified and then addressed.

In creating a character there must be an objective or goal that drives that character’s actions and behaviors. Reducing that goal to basic human drives is imperative to make the character recognizable and identifiable to the actor as well as to the audience. For the actor, the objective becomes the spine or intention of the character. Thomas positions this relentless drive to obtain the objective as developing out of the character’s soul, defined by the social, political, religious, artistic fabric of the interior life.\(^{13}\) In creating game characters, objectives are most evident in the RPG genre such as the foundling characters in the Final Fantasy series of games. Objectives are often revealed to the player in the course of the game, parsing out bit by bit as the narrative moves forward. This mirrors the textual development of classic linear narrative, allowing the audience to ascertain the character’s goals over the course of the action, heightening interest and the level of emotional engagement with the character. For example, Cloud (from Final Fantasy VII) begins the game as a character with seemingly limited objectives of gaining money from assignment to assignment. This mercenary objective is altered in the course of the game as Cloud’s goal becomes more personal and has heightened emotional stakes – uncovering the mystery of his origin. In his quest, Cloud

\(^{13}\) James Thomas, *Script Analysis for Actors, Directors, and Designers*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Focal Press, 1999) 82-84.
becomes entangled in the machinations of AVALANCHE (the rebel organization) as its trajectory aligns with Cloud’s need for personal discovery.

In contrast to the foundling character, the class selection method and character generation modes are driven by specific objectives that change from mission to mission within the course of the game. For example, in the game *Neverwinter Nights*, the player creates a character using the character generation method. No matter what type of character is created, the objective is always linked to the plot of the game rather than to the individual character. The goal of the game is to save the town of Neverwinter from the plague and to do that the character created by the player must tackle a series of missions that reveal various parts of the mystery. Character selection technique is similar to this, utilizing the plot to determine the objective without a sense of the individual. Regardless of the linearity of the plot structure, the character’s objective is the game objective with no possibility of changing unless the overarching objective of the game alters. The player has no agency, creating a character that has no dramatic value and is simply a pawn in the action. To some extent, the character’s objective is a straightforward reflection of the player’s objective – winning the game – with no sense of investment in the game’s characters.

Closely linked to the concept of objectives is *dramatic action*. As Thomas describes it, dramatic actions are the “behavioral tactics characters use to achieve their objectives.”\(^\text{14}\) For actors, the dramatic action becomes the means of ‘playing’ the objective. The actions of the character are linked to verbs, reformulating the objective to specific ‘doable’ tactics. Examples of verbs used by actors to articulate their objectives

\(^{14}\) Thomas, 85.
are: to intimidate, to seduce, to defend, etcetera. By analyzing dialogue in this way, through a trajectory of micro-actions, energy is generated to propel the plot forward even in scenes in which little physical action takes place. The crystallization of objectives in this way is standard to actor training in this country. In games, there are a limited number of dramatic actions available to the player – fighting, escaping, exploring – but the choices made still impact the narrative.

Of the three types of game narratives, the class selection method is the least concerned with dramatic action. In *Warcraft III*, the player assumes the character of an orc, a human, a night elf, or an undead and begins the quest to achieve superiority over the other races in the game. The development of the character is minimal as the focus of the game lies in strategy rather than role-play. Although the player takes on a character in a defined world, the focus on winning overtakes the need for dramatic action. The minimal development offered is presented only in the single person game mode, utilizing cut scenes each time the player ‘wins’ a particular mission. In the multi-player mode, playing a character is contingent on the player’s need or desire to join in the role-playing experience. In conversation with other players, either the gamer can be involved in the game from a god perspective, maintaining a sense of self and rejecting character, or he/she can opt to assume the behaviors inherent in the race (class) of the character being played. In both cases, the amount of role-play is determined by how much the player wants to play the character. That desire is balanced with the craving to win and games
are often designed to cater to those who role-play rather than those who simply play the
game as a tactical exercise.\textsuperscript{15}

Foundlings have the most clearly defined dramatic actions that are created by the
designers and writers to be discovered in the course of the game. The entire game is
scripted to follow a proscribed narrative arc. In \textit{Tomb Raider}, Lara Croft makes
decisions that determine plot and reveal her character in cut scenes with no interaction
with the player. She is unchangeable, merely a device to further the narrative. In \textit{Final
Fantasy VII}, Cloud varies his behavior patterns throughout the game to become
flirtatious, sorrowful, vengeful, and rebellious depending on the characters he is
interacting with. His relationship with Aeris and the other party members shifts over
time as his main objective, determining his origin, demands new tactics to achieve
results. This more detailed dramatic action occurs with relatively little input from the
player.\textsuperscript{16} Instead, the game serves as both actor and playwright, making the choices for
the player to achieve a specified dramatic arc that supports the plot.

In contrast, games that use character generation allow the player some options in
choosing dramatic actions of the character. In \textit{Neverwinter Nights}, many interactions
with non-playable characters (NPCs) result in a predetermined list of dialogue selections

\textsuperscript{15} With \textit{Everquest} the server the player uses can indicate a depth of engagement with role-playing. Specific
servers have been set-up for those players who wish to be completely immersed in the world of Norrath
while others assume a less intense focus on character and some social engagement that reflects the modern
world rather than the fantastic.

\textsuperscript{16} The player does have input on the development of Cloud’s character in one circumstance. The game
presents some occasions where Cloud reacts to the various female characters in the game. The reactions of
the player determine whom Cloud will take on a ‘date’ when the party reaches the Gold Saucer area.
However, the relationships generated here have no impact on Cloud’s development or on his reaction to
Aeris’s death. Therefore, although there is a sort of dramatic action at work, the result is not in evidence in
the development of the character.
that provide the player choice in deciding which action to ‘play’. For example, the character approaches an NPC in the city of Neverwinter to gain information. The interface generates a window that contains a list of questions/statements that can be posed to the NPC. The list usually has at least three choices, each reflecting a particular attitude or emotional approach to the character. The player’s choice then determines how the NPC will respond to the character, varying from offers of aid to threatening violence to simply ignoring him/her. That list is a direct correlation to the choices an actor makes determining dramatic action. Theatrically, the actor has a line to deliver. The meaning of that line can be altered through delivery as an actor plays a different action – i.e. saying ‘I love you’ with the dramatic action of ‘to wound’ is quite different than playing the line with the action of ‘to seduce’. Lacking the vocal inflexion and physical presence of live performance, the gamer must make do with the list of choices presented to the character and the limitations imposed by such a list. With such choices, the player does have some sense of dramatic action and its impact on the character.

*Conflict* creates the essence of drama as the audience witnesses the struggles generated by characters at war with themselves and the world around them. For Thomas, conflict is split into two types: “1. role conflicts stemming from characters’ opposing views of each other and 2. conflict of objectives stemming from their opposing goals.”\(^\text{17}\) In the majority of games, the conflict of objectives is the primary focus giving the player tangible obstacles in the game. Rather than attempting the subtle struggle of inner turmoil, game conflict is far less restrained and results in violence rather than character driven impassioned monologues.

\(^{17}\) Thomas, 86.
Lara Croft is not in conflict with herself or her role as a tomb raider. Instead, her conflicts are openly violent, resolved with guns and missile launchers as she obliterates anything and everything that stands in the path of achieving her objective: finding treasure. When not being attacked by wolves or rival tomb raiders, Lara is solving puzzles and avoiding traps. In *Neverwinter Nights* and *Everquest* the clash is similar, resulting from a conflict of objectives as NPCs continually seek to impede the character’s progress to an objective. This in turn provides an endless supply of bodies needed to allow characters to overcome enemies and to accumulate experience and money in order to achieve the end objective.

Recent games have begun to favor the development of both types of conflict to foster greater opportunity for empathy. Such games tend to focus on the common theme of self-discovery for the main character, allowing for both role and objective conflicts to exist simultaneously in the action driven culture of gaming. Using foundling characters, these games thrive on characters that are driven by personal doubt and misery while forcing them into continual turmoil as they attempt to discover their reason for existence. In *FFVII*, Cloud is a key example of this conflicted character continually seeking his origins. The discovery that he is a clone, a copy of a copy, clashes with his belief that he is human. This knowledge sends him into a dark despair and leads to his disappearance. The player must use other characters to advance the plot, searching for Cloud in various locations throughout the game environment. *Primal*, a recent 3rd person action game (2003), focuses on a young female character named Jen who is pulled into another dimension which reveals that she is part demon. Initially, her objective is to save her lover, Lewis, who has been abducted into the demon world of Oblivion. Upon
discovering her supernatural origins, a role disagreement emerges as Jen must battle between her perception of herself as a human and her perception of herself as a monster. Her sense of self as monster is dictated by the social understanding of demons and her immediate assumption that in being a demon, she is a monster. As the game progresses, she resolves her role conflict, coming to terms with her dual nature as a human/demon hybrid. This allows the focus of the game to shift to objective conflicts. Her journey, in which she discovers the four demon aspects of her inner self, is a balance between human and demon playing as both to achieve the objective of saving Lewis and herself.

These newer games indicate the interest in increasing role conflicts as dramatic elements of character. Conventional gaming generates characters driven by objective conflicts that have little or nothing to do with character development. Instead, conflicts are generated that justify the amount of monster hunting, violent encounters, and puzzle solving.

Thomas suggests that characters with strong will are the driving forces of drama, propelling the action by generating conflict. Willpower can be deceptive as characters can appear weak due to introspection or inaction yet there can be strength due to the

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18 Primal, Sony Computer Entertainment Europe (Foster City, CA: Sony Computer Entertainment America, 2003), PS2 Console Game. The tagline for the game “Civilization is Only Skin Deep” suggests the role conflict of human versus demon as holding a position of importance within the game. The conflict is also presented visually as Jen changes appearance when utilizing part of her demon nature, becoming ‘ugly’ in relation to a traditional human beauty. In addition, the game play evidences a physical struggle between Jen’s dual natures as her ability to remain in demon form is limited requiring primal energy. The need to stay a demon is dictated by the abilities gained in her various demon forms as well as the difficulty in defeating other demons while in human form.

19 Thomas, 89. The creation of this category in character analysis is also unique to Thomas. Instead of treating willpower as a separate entity, many traditional acting approaches tie will to dramatic action as a type of value judgment in relation to the character’s commitment to the objective. The stronger the will of the character the less limitations the character will have on using any tactic to achieve the objective.
nature of the internal struggle. For actors, determining the willpower of a character adds depth and dimension to the dramatic action while providing the audience with a character that is sympathetic and interesting to watch.

In games, the concept of willpower as a dramatic element is non-existent except as a simplistic representation of strong versus weak. With foundlings, playable characters are strong-willed while NPCs are weak. Game characters are action driven. They must be unique, active, and visually interesting to be playable. Characters that waffle over decisions are dismissed as uninteresting and lack the power to generate player interest. As many of the heroes of RPGs are young teenagers in fantasy environments, special weapons or amulets often augment the physical strength of the character. This amplification of abilities allows characters that appear physically weak and non-threatening to become as tough as Lara Croft who bristles with conventional weaponry. As the player wants to win, manipulating a character with weak willpower holds little appeal. Although Thomas suggests that modern sensibilities prefer victims to heroes, the world of games only exists as a Darwinian trope for survival of the fittest. Additionally, as video games center on fighting and/or solving puzzles, weak-willed characters have little chance of surviving the rigors of dungeon crawling or treasure hunting. In character generation or class selection, willpower is not an option amidst the variables used to create the character.

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20 Thomas, 89. Thomas does suggest that victims are not passive but in the black and white sensibility of game characters victims tend not to survive the conflicts generated within the game except as NPCs relating information about back-story elements. Cloud could be considered a victim of the Shinra Corporation, but his character is more akin to Oedipus, striving to discover the truth at all costs and suffering a reversal due to that exploration, than a modern day victim of corporate evil.
While the protagonist and his/her party exude willpower, the non-playable characters (NPCs) encountered are generally weak. The one exception to this is the villain of the game. Typically, the hero must face a strong-willed villain to create a dramatic conflict worthy of lengthy hours of game play. In games that utilize foundlings and linear structures, the villains must be capable of facing and escaping the hero time and time again to build to a climactic final confrontation. In *Final Fantasy VII* Cloud faces two villains – the corporation, Shinra, and the warrior, Sephiroth – one a large faceless entity and the other a revered hero turned evil. In facing Sephiroth multiple times over the course of the game, the villain is continually more skilled and stronger than Cloud and his friends. The only reason Cloud survives is his persistence in fighting and pure luck. Cloud’s strength of will is continually tested by Sephiroth and the two characters are tied together, destined to battle to determine the fate of the world. This climax is created by the two strongest wills in the game being forced into a conflict to the death. The device of the corporate villain is also a relatively common trait of RPGs. The sense of willpower from the entity of corporate evil is generally greater than the strength of will from the individual hero.\(^{21}\) Yet, the hero battles single characters or small groups, allowing a triumph over the evil entity in small doses. In this way, the willpower of the individual is valued over the combined power of the corporate world, able to defeat scores of evil minions rather than being crushed by the machinery of capitalism.

\(^{21}\) There is also a sense of the David and Goliath story at work in this style of engagement. The hero (seen as weak in comparison to the larger evil) has little chance of actually beating the antagonist. In fact, in many games, the protagonist encounters evil that is physically stronger multiple times (often referred to as Boss battles). With each win, the player gains a feeling of satisfaction that the ‘little guy’ can take on the ‘boss’ and win.
In creating a character, no trait is more socially defining than values. The stance of the character in relation to the world of the play determines the audience’s feeling of good and bad, right and wrong. Thomas positions values as being one of the major factors in determining how far a character will go in order to obtain his/her objective. The character’s placement on the relative scale of good to evil provides the audience with a means to understand and evaluate the character and his/her actions. For an actor, knowing the values of a character – what he/she believes in relation to morality – provides another source of developing tactics (dramatic actions) for achieving their goals.

RPGs that employ foundling characters utilize common values. In these games values are often revealed in the course of play giving the player some insights regarding why the characters behave as they do. As in the Final Fantasy series many RPGs gather groups of different characters to create depth and interest. As the group is formed, the values of certain characters are revealed to expose the good inside an otherwise questionable moral fiber. As characters disclose themselves as ‘good,’ a player can connect to the game emotionally, engaged by the shift in behavior patterns. Most commonly, a character who is a rogue of some sort, usually a gambler or mercenary, joins the party for reasons that are unclear and/or suspect. In FFVII this character is the thief, Yuffie, a young female who robs Cloud upon first acquaintance. As the game progresses, her character is discovered to be a strong ally intent on saving the world rather than simply joining the quest for the money or the treasure. That discovery often occurs late in the game, usually when the main character is at a low emotional point.

\[22\] Thomas, 92.
With the revelation of the good-hearted gambler or the well-intentioned thief, the hero’s faith in the world is renewed and the game continues. This particular twist is common in theatrical melodramas as well as Hollywood epics reinforcing the obvious reliance on stock characters and scenarios.

In contrast to the predetermined values of the foundlings, the importance of choosing values becomes prominent in the character generation model. In most games, one of the main decisions a player will make in developing his/her character is determining values. In the game world the term ‘alignment’ is a synonym for ‘values’. Alignments are explained in game handbooks. Drawing from the character creation rules of the Dungeons and Dragons pen and paper games, the generation model creates a scale that determines alignment (or values) in relation to a percentage of good versus evil, right versus wrong. In Neverwinter Nights, the player determines values using five factors: Chaotic, Neutral, Lawful, Good, and Evil. Figure 4.1 recreates the alignment grid from the Neverwinter handbook. Alignment is determined by combining two of the factors

![Alignment Grid](image)

Figure 4.1: Recreation of the character alignment grid from the Neverwinter Nights handbook (pg. 190)
(Chaotic Good, Lawful Neutral, etc.) to indicate the moral stance of the character. This stance (and the resulting percentage) will effect how the character will be perceived by NPCs in the town as well as opening or closing some options within the game. For example, characters with a Chaotic Evil alignment are prone to gaining aid from thieves and rogues with no difficulty while priests often won’t speak to such characters because they are viewed as ‘shady’ or suspect.

*Personality traits* are the identifiable patterns of human behavior that appear in a multiplicity of situations. For Thomas this can be applied to various parameters of character creation, from appearance to physical gestures to behavioral quirks. In creating a character profile, an actor identifies these traits and compiles them into a description which serves as a thumbnail sketch of the character’s personality. Usually the traits are referenced as adjectives, describing the behaviors and emotional states such as kind, generous, sarcastic, introverted, etc. For an actor, such quick sketches provide an initial entry point into playing the role, generating identifiable behaviors that the actor can classify and utilize in creating a character. In games character profiles are standard practice, sometimes the only evidence of characterization as a dramatic element rather than as a purely visual element. All too often the player’s avatar is simply a fighting machine that is justified in a personality sketch with little or no depth within the narrative arc of game play.

Foundlings, the most common RPG characters, are often introduced to players via a written description accompanied by a drawing. Usually included in the game materials, this sketch of personality traits provides the player with insight into the psyche of the

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23 Thomas, 95-96.
character as well as the basic weapons and/or skills available to him/her. For examples of this, please see Appendix B. In reading the short paragraph on Lara Croft, the player discovers that the character suffered a major life change at the age of 21. Stranded by a plane crash, Lara is the only member of her party to survive which shapes her personality. Rather than spending life as a pampered aristocrat, Lara pursues the path of archeologist and tomb raider. This indicates her strong willpower while suggesting her tenacity and inventiveness. In providing minimal back-story, the game designers generate enough material to make Lara ‘believable’ while using her wealth and skill with weapons to distance her from the ordinary female, making her an action hero for the 90’s. In most third person action and RPG games, the type of sketch captures the attention of the player by revealing enough to tantalize, creating an aura of mystery for the player to solve within the course of the game.

In character generation, the development of personality traits is somewhat different. Again returning to the Dungeons & Dragons model, the development of a character occurs initially by creating a simple matrix of numbers that indicate skills and attributes for the character. The player decides which attributes receive higher values, effectively designing the character to match his/her specifications. The choices allowed for creating the electronic avatar likewise encourage player participation, allowing a selection of gender, race, hair color, initial outfit, and more, depending upon the complexity of variables available in the generation process. With such options available, this model encourages the creation of a character that is unique to the player while still bound by the scenarios of the plot. With Everquest, the player is able to determine the character’s personality, or at least a guiding set of behaviors, in the initial creation phase.
The player builds the character by choosing the following factors: race, class, ability points, appearance, name, and religion. In this game alignment (values) is determined by race and religion choice, indicating the relative stance towards the world of Norrath.

Further personality traits are known as abilities and are assigned numeric values. This is a reflection of the old D & D character generator which used dice and a piece of paper. Abilities such as agility, charisma, dexterity, wisdom, intelligence, stamina (constitution), and strength are each determined by a number. Originally decided by the throw of the dice, the ability points of a character are now assigned by a combination of player and computer. The higher the number the greater that character’s skill (or ability) in that facet of character. As the character progresses through the game, these numeric values are altered indicating the changing abilities of the character.

Class selection offers a similar model but limits the number of factors that are adjusted by the player creating a blend of the foundling and character generation models. The console version of the popular RPG series *Baldur’s Gate (Baldur’s Gate: Dark Alliance)* uses the class selection model. In the beginning of the game, the player selects his/her character based on a preference of class. Limited to playing a human ranger, dwarven fighter, or elven sorceress, the player is picking a character that has a complete set of previously assigned abilities. The customization occurs in selecting gender, name, and some physical characteristics. Regardless of the method used to create or introduce characters, the gaming world relies heavily on the use of personality traits to capture player interest, often allowing a character sketch to serve as the only nod to character development.
One of the most important elements of creating strong dramatic characters lies in
*complexity*. This term indicates the level of self-awareness within the character as well as
the depth of development that occurs over the course of the story. It also implies a sense
of responsibility for his/her new behavior and action. The more self-awareness, the more
important that character becomes in the plot, able to influence the actions of others.
Thomas places the complexity of characters on a progressive scale with the protagonist
serving as the most complex while the surrounding characters become less and less
complex in correlation to their relationship with the main character.\(^2^4\) The least complex
characters are labeled as types, displaying a single state of mind, dominated by
personality traits that show little to no change over the course of the narrative.

Complexity is the character trait that is least developed in the game world. The
majority of all characters are limited to types with little or no self-awareness. Like
personality traits, complexity appears as an afterthought, a *raison d’être* for the physical
presence of the gaming character, but rarely a dramatically motivated element in
storytelling. Of the three models for game character creation, the only one with a sense
of dramatic complexity is the foundling. With the foundlings, there is some attempt at
generating a character arc as these characters experience a life change, climatic battle, or
some other peak in the action that initiates a transformation in the character. With the

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\(^2^4\) Thomas, 96-98. Thomas also notes that complexity indicates a willingness to share awareness with the
audience, pointing to Hamlet as a signature complex character. He also seems to suggest that the
protagonist is the most complex with all other characters having varying degrees of complexity. This is a
risky statement as some actors will tend to develop their characters beyond the playwright’s suggestions,
adding a level of awareness or complexity that Thomas would argue should not exist. However, that added
sense of depth and dimension, by Thomas’s own admission, creates more interesting drama for an audience
to witness.
class selection and character generation types, the player is generating a type, albeit unique to the player, but still limited in behavioral patterns.

Complexity provides for a gradual awakening in the main character. As the player has little control over the changes in a foundling’s dramatic development, self-awareness only becomes evident by the character’s reactions to the world around him/her. Both Cloud (FFVII) and Jen (Primal) are relatively complex characters in the sense that they are aware of the world around them and the consequences of their actions. Yet in a dramatic sense, these characters are still types, drawing from a singular set of behaviors playing the young hero, alone against the world.

Determining the relationships that dictate a character’s focus and behaviors is Thomas’s final characteristic. A central relationship develops between protagonist and antagonist, the conflicting forces of the play. All other relationships revolve around that powerful connection, serving to enhance the story by revealing information and furthering the central conflict. In theatre, the actor playing the protagonist quickly comes to terms with his relationships with the other characters as a means of better understanding his character. In games, the relationships that are discovered as the game progresses serve the same function.

In most RPGs and MMORPGs, the game is enriched by encountering multiple characters that interact with the protagonist. Whether NPCs, group characters, or others, such relationships provide an understanding of the world of the game. These secondary characters provide information, reveal back-story, and expose the protagonist’s character through action and reaction much as theatrical characters do. With a longer duration than

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Thomas, 98-99.
traditional drama, games have the luxury of introducing multiple characters over the course of game play to add interest and variation to the game. For example, in *Suikoden III*, the player assumes the roles of three lead characters, a female knight, a young warrior, and a mercenary, over the course of the game. Each of these characters has a group of friends and companions that serve as secondary relationships for the main characters. As the game progresses, the player can enlist over 100 characters to join the quest, creating a castle stronghold in which every presence has a unique relationship to the three characters. However, once established, those relationships do not shift or deepen in relation to the player’s actions. Instead, initial relationships serve to further character development.

In contrast, the third person action games tend to focus on a sole character that faces a challenge. Lara Croft has virtually no relationships within *Tomb Raider*; instead, she is intently focused on getting the parts of the Scion. Her only relationship is with an entity, the Natala Corporation, which becomes her adversary over the course of the game by sending minions to kill her. There is little sense of personal development in the course of the game as Lara is alone, a singular force that faces multiple challenges and opponents in a physical and mental battle in which she has no emotional investment. This is mainly due to the demands of the genre as the focus is on action rather than role-play or story. With third person action games, the player becomes invested in the game through the action of the plot rather than the dramatic development of the characters.
The Question of Empathy

What emerges from this examination of game characters is the possible answer to why game characters are predominantly one-dimensional constructs. Currently, the three major types of characters – foundlings, class selection, and character generation – all have unique strengths but none matches the depth and dimension of traditional fully developed theatrical characters. While all three utilize objectives, dramatic actions, and conflict, they still fail as dramatically viable, emotionally engaging characters. Thomas uses eight separate headings to analyze character. None of the game character models engages with all eight, exposing weaknesses especially in regards to complexity and willpower. Instead, a surface treatment of character creates a profile of personality traits and values that stands for character analysis. Steven Poole, a game studies theorist, offers the following challenge for game designers:

Videogames have excelled at dynamic character designs - in the rolls, jumps and runs that make us believe we are controlling a living creature - but they have barely scratched the surface in terms of creating people that are believable and interesting to look at. [...] The challenge for videogame character designers in the future, then, is to engage us while continuing to leave room for our imagination.26

With fully articulated visual character designs, games have surpassed the original expectations of visualization. Players demand and receive characters that are interesting to look at and to watch on a purely surface level. What is lacking, as Poole points out, is the depth and emotional engagement possible when the character has a more defined and developed dramatic life to match the physical persona.

Aristotle originally mandated that the most successful dramatic characters have four characteristics: 1. that they be good, 2. that they be appropriate, 3. that they have a likeness to human nature, and 4. that they be consistent.\footnote{Aristotle, \textit{Poetics} 43.} He goes on to say that as the dramatic events of the plot unfold, forcing the protagonist into a state of recognition and reversal, a complex plot is generated, creating engaging characters. Game characters violate Aristotle’s guidelines by serving as imitations of fantasy rather than imitations of reality. Although they can be see as good, appropriate, consistent representations of human action, the games are themselves constructs of imagination that revolve around the physical and mental challenge of winning. Games cater to the taste for action, eliminating the indecision and inaction generated by more complex characters. External conflict is the overriding agenda and raison d’être of the game world.\footnote{Gamers do not wish to play \textit{Hamlet}, struggling through the character’s internal agonies. If \textit{Hamlet} were to become a game, the painful deliberations of whether or not Hamlet should kill his uncle would be removed and the focus would shift to actually killing Claudius. Laertes, Gertrude, and Polonius would become obstacles to be removed or destroyed to clear the way to the main objective.}\footnote{Michael Kirby provides a term for this list of numbers with his idea of a symbolized matrix. For Kirby, a continuum exists stretching from non-acting to acting with stages of character creation. In those stages, a symbolized matrix is the first stage of character development. In this stage, “the performer does not act and yet his or her costume represents something or someone” (5). He suggests that emotion is the key ingredient which lifts a symbolized matrix to a simple acting performance. The symbolized matrix is the stage equivalent to the majority of game characters, and for Kirby, lacks the emotions necessary to become true dramatic characters in relation to an actor.}

As a result, games are removed from the empathic connection stimulated by traditional dramatic characters. Instead, games function through a matrix of numbers signifying certain skills and/or behavior patterns. Rather than getting inside a role and acting the character, the player manipulates a pawn on the screen.\footnote{The avatar is a digital assemblage that has the outward appearance of character (warrior, elf, dwarf, etc.)}
but emotional investment is missing. The theatrical equivalent of such an avatar is an actor in costume but not yet in character, relying on visual trappings to convey the character. Such shallow performance work is not acceptable in the theatre.

One game that attempted to break the mold of third person action while achieving a unique connection with its audience was *Ico*. Developed by Sony Computer Entertainment in 2001, this game was originally destined for the PlayStation but was released for the PS2. Using a simple story, the game follows a 12 year old boy named Ico. The game opens with Ico being offered as a sacrifice to the spirits by his village. Escaping his sacrificial murder through the cover of an earthquake, Ico is trapped within a fortress and discovers a female prisoner named Yorda. Together the two spend the game avoiding traps and solving puzzles in an attempt to win their freedom in a conventional game format. But *Ico* uses a unique playing structure to generate an empathic connection in the player. As the player controls Ico, Yorda looks on and experiences emotional reactions. Yorda expresses fear and longing, providing an emotional roadmap for the player. Yorda is not a fighter or a typical video game character. She is not a foundling, a class model, or a generated character. Instead she is the Aristotelian model – good, appropriate, consistent, and a representation of humanity. Much of the game is focused on protecting Yorda, shifting away from the traditional action frame with its emphasis on the single hero. Mental skill is required as the player

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30 In addition to representing the Aristotelian model, the character of Yorda can be seen as a sort of Greek chorus. As the model of what is good and right, Yorda represents an ideal while her commentary on the situations within the game functions in the same manner as the chorus, serving as the voice of the polis. Ico, only twelve years old, must protect the ‘good’ at all costs. He defends Yorda and must always accommodate her needs which would also seem to be a reflection of Yorda as the social norm.
deciphers how to maneuver Ico into defensive positions, allowing Yorda time to escape the attacking spirits.

The game is relatively short, averaging about 8 hours to complete. Yet, the game has a depth and poignancy that is remarkable in the forest of hack-and-slash treasure hunting titles. Unlike Tomb Raider this game forces an emotional engagement due to the relationship created by Ico and Yorda. Lacking the self-sufficient abilities of other screen partnerships, Yorda must be protected and guided, forcing the player into an active relationship that begins to develop into an empathic connection. Importantly, Yorda is an emotional mirror for Ico, giving the player a kind of alter ego with a sense of ‘high stakes’ in the struggle to succeed. With Lara Croft, the struggle to succeed has no penalty other than simply losing the time spent in maneuvering the character to the next level. In Ico, the sense of failure is more acute due to the emotional relationship generated between Ico, Yorda, and the player.

Although games have begun to offer players the opportunity to choose dramatic actions with varying degrees of impact as well as plot and character development, the reality of the game world resides in the mechanics rather than the dramatic elements of the game. As Stephen Poole has noted earlier, the game industry needs to develop

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31 This could be a part of the reason for the limited success of Ico within the market. As most games average $50.00, a short playing time is seen as a bad investment. Also, the initial release of this game was intended for PlayStation but due to a lengthy development time, the game was designed for the PlayStation2 and released early in the console’s history. That release combined with the limited playing time seemed to make the game less marketable and as a result, the game was poorly advertised and less played than other RPG titles. Also Sony was aware of the Final Fantasy series as the frontrunner in RPG style so this game, with its unique design, was seen as a less viable product. In the end, the game has come to be seen as a type of ‘high art’ within games which immediately equates to low financial success and therefore not a product to be emulated in the commercially driven game industry.

32 Steven Poole, "Character Forming." Game on: The History and Culture of Videogames, ed. Lucien King (London: Laurence King, 2002) 83,85
characters that are both believable and interesting. Game designer David Freeman champions adding emotion to the mix as follows:

When emotion is added to a game, then the game will appeal to wider demographics. The game gets better press, better buzz, and is more likely to generate allegiance to the brand. The development team will have increased passion for the project. All this translates to increased profits and a much richer game experience. Evoking emotion as crucial to a better gaming experience, Freeman follows a multitude of theatre theorists (beginning with Aristotle) who identify emotion as central to the theatre event. In order to improve the game world, designers/creators can use theatrical character analysis to provide insights into the creation of complex characters while still functioning in the action-driven nonlinear world of games. *Ico* is an example of what is possible.

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33 Freeman, *Creating Emotion in Games* 16. This text is relatively new and the first of its type to focus on emotional content within game design. Its release may signal a readiness within the industry to focus on developing character and narrative as dramatic elements. However, Freeman is a screenwriter and never mentions theatre in his approach to ‘emotioneering’ which creates a vacuum within his text. By using film as his main proponent for developing emotion he bypasses the information conveyed in the rich tradition of theatre.
CHAPTER 5

MELODRAMA REWIRED: MYTHS, MONSTERS, AND MADNESS

Game designers increasingly focus on the overall ‘mood’ or emotional colour of their projects. Hoping to produce games that can provide a broader range of emotional experiences, they draw inspiration from classic melodrama, where elements of the mise en scene become emotional correlatives for the protagonist’s woes.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries American theatre was dominated by the melodrama. This form of theatre was intensely emotional and depended on exaggeration, suspense, and stereotypes to generate connections with the working class audiences of the time. The melodrama was popular entertainment, utilizing simple plots and lush spectacles to entice spectators. Escaping the rigors of daily life, the audience was swept into tales of adventure and romance in which good always triumphed over evil. The appeal of this art form is suggested by Daniel C. Gerould in the following passage:

On the melodramatic stage mute peasants, blind orphans, destitute pariahs are made whole again, receive inheritances, find ideal mates, discover better parents, acquire new identities, become rich and happy. Everything is possible: undergo a change of heart, start life anew, reform, move on, escape, be someone else. Even the villain may be offered these options. Social background, genes, wealth, talent are not major determinants in melodrama. All empathy goes to the long-shots who come from behind, to triumphant underdogs, to lucky lottery ticket holders. If not every one can win, each human being has the chance in a society unfettered by Old World hierarchies of class and profession.


This type of theatre represented the democratic ideology of America, equalizing all citizens onstage. Anything is possible in the world of melodrama and that sense of freedom was and remains popular in the American audience.

The creation of melodrama is dependent on certain qualities. The introductory text, *The Theater Experience* by Edwin Wilson, provides a list of these characteristics as follows:

1. The audience is drawn into the action.
2. The issues are clear-cut, and there is a strong delineation of right and wrong.
3. The characters are clearly recognizable as good or bad.
4. The action is exaggerated, with the main characters always living in danger and on the edge of calamity.
5. There is a strong emphasis on suspense.\(^3\)

These five points provide a simple outline of the melodramatic form and provide hints to the appeal of the genre. Characters, as mentioned in Gerould’s essay, were drawn from all walks of life each with the potential to become successful and ‘happy’. The obstacles along this path to democratic prosperity were many often involving physical dangers for the hero and/or heroine. With characters continually living in peril, the audience cannot resist the lure of witnessing such ‘drama’ when placed before them. Rooting for good to triumph and for evil to be redeemed, the audience was engaged in the action, trapped in the often illogical and convoluted world of these stories.

Melodrama focuses on fear and horror as a means of connecting with spectators. The vicarious experiences of being stalked, tortured, suffering from a deadly disease, or being pursued by unknown villains were all part of the melodramatic experience. By placing these democratic heroes/heroines in such situations, the audience experienced the

‘chills and thrills’ of the spectacle but with the certainty of all ending well. The settings of these stories were generated through technological spectacle, drawing on exotic locations and special effects to create sensational scenes of illusion. This focus on spectacle was another significant factor in the success of the form. Gerould continues:

Whatever melodrama lacked in psychological insight and artistic depth, it made up for by sheer technological skill. If its style and thought were primitive, the special effects of melodrama were sophisticated products of the latest advances in applied science. American materialism and entrepreneurial capitalism found in melodrama a congenial art. Intensely competitive and responsive to market conditions, theatres deployed battalions of stage hands to reproduce ever more faithfully train-wrecks, fires, snow-storms, steamship explosions, and avalanches (known as sensational scenes).  

Admittedly flimsy in the sense of realistic drama, the melodrama was focused on maintaining audience interest in a changing world. With the advent of the industrial revolution the culture of nineteenth century American was excited by the exotic and the scientific while being reassured by the moralistic nature of these theatrical entertainments. Additionally, the connection between theatre and capitalism in relation to this particular genre points to a possible tie between theatre and games. With the fascination and taste for spectacle, the early twenty first century audience can be seen as an evolution from the nineteenth century American audience that demanded melodrama as its popular entertainment.

The melodrama remains a strong force in American culture adopting itself to multiple mediums. David Grimstead points to the continued popularity of the form as connected to its prevalent theme more so than any other factor. “Plays centered on the adventures of the heroine and romances on those of the hero, but the theme was exactly

the same: the victory of the forces of morality, social restraint and domesticity over what was dark, passionate, and anti-social." This simple theme when combined with lush stage spectacle appealed to audiences by allowing an escape from the harsh realities of the everyday life. With the advent of film in the early twentieth century, melodrama entrenched itself in the creation of silent movies. With its penchant for spectacle and the ease of following plot lines, the silent era allowed the melodramas of stage to find a new home in celluloid which has persisted into today’s Hollywood blockbusters. The later advent of television proved another fertile ground for melodrama as soap operas, westerns, and science fiction epics became commonplace amidst offerings of comedy and drama. Finally, the melodrama has found a new home in video games. The simple nature of game plots, the one dimensional characters, and the fixation with graphic spectacle all point to a connection with this theatrical form, reborn in the age of mediatized culture.

The bond between games and theatrical melodrama is most evident in the thematic threads common to many video games. Games, like melodramas, focus on the battle between good and evil. Additionally, the characters are clearly recognizable and easily identified in relation to their moral stance. With the added lengthy timeline of games, the perilous journey of the hero/heroine is extended but remains an obvious descendent of its theatrical ancestor. The world of video games depends on violence and monsters permeating these virtual realms, generating a new form of technological melodrama. The genres of role-playing (RPGs) and action provide the best examples of this connection. In the following, I will examine common themes in these game genres.

These include religion and myth, the concept of the quest, and the element of danger.

Finally, I will conclude with a short discussion of the spectacle generated in video games as a parallel to theatrical design.

**Religion and Myth: Gods and Monsters**

In the world of melodrama the concept of good versus evil is generally based on some moral structure which is connected to societal and/or religious values. In games this value system is unique to each individual game but must reflect aspects of the ‘real’ world so players are able to function without having to learn an alien set of ideologies or cultural mores. The majority of game worlds that utilize fantastical or science fiction environments must rely on a moral structure that is recognizable to a modern audience. This in turn allows the players to have a sense of intuitive connection with the game world while the game gods provide a sense of fantasy and added plot interest through their varied individual characteristics. In some cases religion is blended with mythology to create recognizable references to ancient civilizations. Elements of Egyptian, Norse, and Greek mythology meld with pagan, Christian, and Buddhist theologies to create worlds that have recognizable standards for good and evil while remaining exotic and interesting to the player.\(^6\)

In linear role-playing games, the player discovers the world of the game in the course of play. In that discovery, religious elements are often included to heighten the dramatic nature of the storyline as well as to provide a sense of depth in an otherwise

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\(^6\) It is also important to note that the amalgamation of various religions in game theologies is partially due to the varied backgrounds of the creators. With the *Final Fantasy* series, the creative team is predominantly Japanese. This inevitably adds an Eastern influence to the understanding of Western culture including the interpretation of Christianity. The reverse is true when the game is produced in the West but addresses elements of Eastern culture. The other point is that in both cases, the common choice is to include something of the opposite culture drawing on the audience’s love of the exotic much like in the creation of 19\(^{th}\) century melodrama.
two-dimensional reality. Religious references permeate game stories generating new mythologies and theologies. In particular, *Final Fantasy X*, which was released in 2002, employs a rich religious theology as a motivating force behind the plot of the game. Characters battle evil in large and small forms to redeem themselves and the world dependent on the religious beliefs of the game world known as Spira.

In *Final Fantasy X*, the world is in a state of recovery from a long past cataclysm which changed the face of the world. This catastrophe created a faceless monster that attacks the helpless people of Spira. This monster, called ‘Sin’, must be beaten by individuals called summoners. These characters are warrior priests, able to calm the spirits of the dead and to summon aid in the form of spiritual beings that have different fighting abilities. These beings, known as aeons, are representative of the elements such as fire, air, earth, and water. This elemental connection suggests a strong tie between the summoner and the realms of spirit and nature. Only the summoner is capable of defeating Sin. All individuals in Spira follow the teachings of Yevon, the original summoner, hoping for a time in which Sin will exist no more. As the game progresses, the player learns of the story behind the great cataclysm. The world, fixated on technology and personal gain, destroyed itself. In that destruction the sins of the world coalesced into the entity known as Sin that continually haunts the people of Spira. The summoners must sacrifice themselves and their protectors to Sin to achieve redemption and a time of ‘calm’ for the people of Spira. Sin can never be truly defeated, only temporarily overcome.

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7 The creation of Sin can also be viewed as a coalescence of corporate greed and a destruction of the natural world which is also a common element in the *Final Fantasy* series of games. The devastation of the environment is often linked to a death of the physical and the spiritual world in many games, teaching a ‘lesson’ about ecological responsibility.
The game follows one summoner, Yuna, on her quest to defeat Sin. Her journey is fraught with challenges and moral dilemmas designed to forge her into the weapon that must defeat Sin. In addition to this monster, Yuna and her protectors face other forms of evil. Sin’s awakened presence generates negative energy that in turn creates monsters that roam the lands of Spira. Yuna and her party battle these monsters as they travel from place to place in preparation to battle Sin. In the course of that journey Yuna encounters evil in the form of various individuals corrupted by power. Most notably, the religious community of the world is discovered to be flawed as its primary leaders are exposed as being tainted by Sin. Stunned by the duplicity of the Maesters of Yevon, Yuna is forced to reject her traditional religious teachings to survive her journey and to defeat Sin. This rejection of her religion frees her to find a new path to battle the monster. Her eventual sacrifice of her love, Tidus, and his willingness to die for the good of Spira achieves the ultimate defeat of the monster. This storyline is an amalgamation of ancient traditions of blood sacrifice melded with the Christian ideology of the one perfect sacrifice in the form of Christ.8

Not all RPGs employ such an overt use of religious references. Instead, many employ religious devices such as priests and temples to provide a sense of the ‘good’ in these fantastical realms. Often the nature of the spirit is linked to the condition of the environment suggesting that these realms are ‘aware’ of the behaviors of their inhabitants. Corruption and evil are often linked with technology and the destruction of

8 It is also interesting to note that the creators of Final Fantasy found this particular storyline and character grouping to be worthy of a true sequel, Final Fantasy X-2. In the sequel, the player returns to Spira once again traveling as Yuna but this time in search of information about Tidus. While journeying across the land, the religious factions from the previous game have changed. In this game religious conflict is inevitable as the Youth League and the order of New Yevon battle for supremacy in the changed environment. This suggests the inevitability of religious conflict once there is nothing left to fear – Sin is dead so what is left to instill order in the masses?
this natural spirit, forcing the characters into fighting to save the planet. In *Final Fantasy VII* this is a particularly strong theme as both Cloud and the creature Red XIII are victims of genetic tampering. The company which has harmed them both, Shinra, is slowly raping the world, draining it of magical energy. The good in this game is located with the environmental action group known as AVALANCHE which is attempting to destroy Shinra and save the planet. Once again blood sacrifice is blended with a Christian understanding of redemption providing a religious impetus for the evolution of the characters. Aeris, the ‘pure and innocent’ character, is killed relatively early in the game. The death of an innocent then forces Cloud to question his reason for existence as well as placing him on the path of vengeance for Aeris’s death. This sacrifice (Aeris is killed trying to protect Cloud) is the catalyst for transforming the other characters into heroes rather than a group of travelers. Aeris is also the primary connection with the magical, spiritual nature of the planet. Her death also indicates the urgent need for the downfall of the corporation and its destructive technology. The convergence of nature and the spirit world in the form of magic has roots in pagan theology, where emphasis is often on the female as the primary conduit. The feminine goddess sensibility is evident in many games where women are physically weaker but spiritually stronger, thus capable of becoming magic users rather than fighters.

In third person action games such as *Primal*, *Nightmare Creatures*, and *Beyond Good and Evil*, the faces of right and wrong, good and evil vary widely depending on the game. In *Primal*, the game revolves around a normal twentieth century heroine, Jen, who is drawn into a demon dimension. Once in the demon world of Oblivion, Jen discovers her dual nature as human and demon hybrid. Her tasks are set by the goddess of Order,
Arella, as she journeys through four demon realms to fight the god of Chaos, Abaddon. Here the moral structure is more mythical, based on balance between good and evil, order and chaos. This simplicity of structure suggests a tie to the clarity of melodrama. Jen serves Arella. Hence she must be good. Her opposition is Chaos and the traps set by Abaddon as he seeks to corrupt and turn good to his service. The interesting twist in this mythos is that demons, traditionally seen as bad, are neither inherently good nor evil but instead independent agents that seek to serve their chosen god. Each of the four realms represents an elemental energy that contains both order and chaos. Two of the realms tend to balance towards chaos and two towards order making Jen’s journey one of peril and discovery. Ultimately, the restoration of balance is the goal of the game where good restores order rather than vanquishing evil.

In *Nightmare Creatures* the elements of the occult are used as the impetus to recruit the hero or heroine, Father Ignatius Blackward or Nadia F. The player selects which character he/she will control through the course of the game. One character, Father Blackward, is a man of God while the other, Nadia, is a scientist and world traveler. Religion and science join forces to combat the Brotherhood of Hecate. The rise of this evil force is attributed to the arcane writings of Samuel Pepys which have fallen into the hands of Adam Crowley, a sinister figure who roams the shadows of London. In true melodrama style, the two main characters unite on a quest to battle evil. The minions of Crowley include the traditional occult monsters, zombies, werewolves, demons, harpies, hellhounds, and faceless men pulling from a multitude of mythologies

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9 This use of Crowley is particularly interesting as a possible play on the real-life occult leader Alistair Crowley whose *Book of the Dead* was well known in London in the nineteenth century. The game occurs in the same time frame supporting this connection.
to assemble a horrifying array of creatures. In this game, religion is synonymous with
good, used to clearly identify good from evil as well as giving the player a sense of
accomplishment as he/she saves London from being overrun by monsters.

In multi-player games moral references and structures mainly support the virtual
worlds of play. In some, such as *Starcraft* and *Diablo*, the focus is on strategy to win
rather than on role-playing. These games often employ multiple races, with their own
religions much like modern society, which are in conflict with one another. This use of
religious distinctions increases the sense of reality in playing the game. In other online
games religion is used as another aspect of character creation as well as plot
development. Such games often rely on a pagan theology, creating a pantheon of gods to
appeal to players. This pantheon approach is a logical means to allow players to develop
characters on an individual level as opposed to simply identifying one religion with one
race. For example, in *Everquest* the player selects his/her primary god, choosing his/her
religion which will influence a character over the course of the game. Religious factions
can generate large-scale conflicts. Mirroring the crusades of history or the more recent
examples of religious conflicts in Northern Ireland or ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, the
players of *Everquest* can find themselves locked into controversy and conflict dependent
on their religion.

Finally, god games must be included in this discussion of religion and myth as
fundamental elements of melodrama. Pioneered by Peter Molyneux, this form of
simulation game puts the player in a position of ultimate control. In this type of game,
the player is worshipped by the inhabitants of his/her world while building his/her
civilization. The game *Black & White*, released in 2001, is a particularly strong example
of this form. The player begins the game in charge of a small village, dictating the actions and behaviors of the villagers. The world is named Eden. Everything from breeding to farming is controlled by the player. To begin his/her religious reign, the player has two spiritual advisors, an angel and a devil, that appear in Faustian fashion, popping up in random corners of the screen to offer insight and advice. Additionally, the player selects a creature that becomes his/her physical presence in the virtual world. This creature evolves over time, learning its behaviors from the player. The player has the option of being either a benevolent god or a cruel tyrant, a choice which his/her creature will then imitate. This mimicry reinforces the status of the god as good or evil, black or white. Power in the game depends on the god/player’s ability to convert more believers, taking over villages and tribes in the process. With the tagline ‘Be good. Be evil. Be a God!’ the game is a working model of modern melodrama, where evil is as likely to triumph over good, and where winning through intimidation can become a divine manifesto.

The Concept of the Quest

As previously noted by David Grimstead, melodrama centers on the hero and/or heroine. He also identifies the melodrama as a world of possibility, existing in a realm beyond the ‘real’: “Not only were many fairy tales made into melodramas on the nineteenth century stage, but most melodramas were full of the elements of the fairy tale in their joyous as well as their mysterious moments. The melodramatic world was one in which anything - good or bad - might happen.”\footnote{Grimstead, *Melodrama Unveiled: American Theater and Culture 1800 - 1850* 196.} The melodramatic model provides the ideal setting for continually retelling the tale of the hero. In *The Hero with a Thousand
Faces, Joseph Campbell charts the well-used traditional paths followed by the heroic icon. He suggests three major segments of action for the hero: departure, initiation, and return.\(^{11}\) Christopher Vogler, a story consultant for feature films, has extrapolated this journey into a three-act structure that parallels the Hollywood formula for action (mentioned in Chapter 3).\(^{12}\) This three act formula uses the three segments indicated by Campbell as a basis for creating the hero’s journey which Vogler describes as follows:

At heart, despite its infinite variety, the hero's story is always a journey. A hero leaves her comfortable, ordinary surroundings to venture into a challenging, unfamiliar world. It may be an outward journey to an actual place: a labyrinth, forest or cave, a strange city or country, a new locale that becomes the arena for her conflict with antagonistic, challenging forces.\(^{13}\)

This basic story of a quest is at the heart of melodrama. In this journey, the hero/heroine is continually faced with obstacles to overcome in order to reach the main objective.

In games the quest story is openly co-opted by numerous designers because it creates the ideal circumstances for game action – hunting treasure, exploring dungeons, battling monsters. The quest framework supports the creation of spectacular environments as the hero must travel great distances away from the familiarity of home in order to achieve his/her goal. Two goals are common amongst game plots: self-discovery and the need to save his/her home (which often expands to saving the planet). In both cases, the hero is typically a young male. This suggests another parallel with melodrama as the age range of the hero fulfills a particular function. As Grimstead explains, “The thin period of sexual adventure sandwiched between the domesticity of


\(^{13}\) Vogler, 13.
childhood and married life was the meat of both the melodrama and the romantic novel.”

In selecting this age for theatre and game, the hero is appealing to audience and player. The young are poised for adventure and change as well as being driven by impetuous faith. With such potential, the young hero is an obvious choice for the protagonist. The youth journeys to distant lands, often gathering companions along the way. These companions often match archetypal figures of the mentors, guardians, heralds, tricksters, and shapeshifters. Additionally, the hero and his companions must be tested, again and again, proving their worthiness to continue the quest. These tests, or missions, make it possible for characters to gain experience and information which often leads to more missions, keeping the game in an active state.

The RPG game *Arc the Lad: Twilight of the Spirits* (2003) provides an interesting variation of the quest concept. The game allows the player to alternate between playing Kharg and Darc, two brothers separated at birth. Both are half human and half deimos (demon), one raised in relative comfort amidst humans and the other raised as a slave among the deimos Orcs. The game places each brother on a quest of self discovery which eventually becomes a quest to unite the battling races and save the world from destruction. In the course of game play, each time the player shifts from the Kharg to Darc the game provides a heading which follows Campbell’s segmentation of action.

Kharg, Chapter 1: The First Battle / Darc, Chapter 1: Awakening
Kharg, Chapter 2: Setting Out / Darc, Chapter 2: Ambition
Kharg, Chapter 3: Conflict / Darc, Chapter 3: Love and Hate
Kharg, Chapter 4: Rage / Darc, Chapter 4: Reunion
Kharg, Chapter 5: Truth / Darc, Chapter 5: Evolution


15 Vogler and Campbell both refer to these types in their respective works.
These chapter titles suggest the progression of the two quests as the heroes journey across their world in hopes of finding answers. Also unique to this game is the correlation between the characters as mirror images of one another; Kharg is the example of the good human and Darc the example of the angry, violent Deimos. Yet neither is perfect and both are seen as flawed by their races due to their mixed blood. To redeem themselves, each must come to grips with his deimos/human nature and then decide how to function in a prejudiced and violent world. In typical melodramatic fashion the two brothers are reunited and must battle each other before addressing their familial relationship. Along the journey, each assembles a group of supporters that aid in the quest creating an interesting symmetry. Figure 5.1 charts this relationship, positioning the characters in Kharg’s party against their opposites in Darc’s party. These relationships show the major obstacles that must be overcome to participate in the final battle as Darc and Kharg must join forces. Also, each character is labeled to suggest what archetypal role they fill in the quest. Factors of vengeance and racial prejudice generate considerable conflict amongst the characters adding to the obstacles placed before Kharg and Darc. In the end, the two resolve to work together for the common good of human and deimos, saving the world from destruction.

The young hero is especially common in the RPG genre while the third person action genre uses the quest device as a mechanism to drive missions for the main character, discarding the concept of transformation and groups of adventurers. Rather

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Major Characters and Relationships

**Kharg**
Half Human, Half Deimos
Raised among humans with his mother
Respected member of the community until his heritage is revealed
Appears Human

**Darc**
Half Human, Half Deimos
Raised among the Deimos as an orphan
Despised for his human heritage / abused and beaten
Appears Deimos

**Paulette**
Human
Warrior - daughter of Lloyd, Leader of the Nidellia defense corps in Yewbell
Kharg's best friend

**Volk**
Deimos - Lupine
Joins group after Darc beats him in battle and becomes his ‘alpha’
His wife and child were killed by humans

**Ganz**
Human
A war orphan who became a mercenary to survive
Has suffered a crisis of conscience

**Delma**
Deimos - Orcon
Warrior - Joins with Darc from interest and later vows to kill him

**Maru**
Human
Wild child discovered in Chaos Forest
He is a lost prince who appears as a wild creature in the forest

**Bebedora**
???
Has the appearance of a child but has the power to destroy the world
Puppet of the dark forces, she is freed by Darc and his party and joins them to feel emotion

**Camellia**
Deimos - Pianta
A sage and powerful mage
She joins Darc once freed from the technological experiments of the Dizweld Army

**Colonel Tatjana**
Human
Scientist
Member of the Dizweld Army Special forces
Originally an enemy of Kharg and his party, she changes sides and joins the fight for good.

**Camellia vows to kill Tatjana**

**Lilia**
Human
Represents purity and innocence
Major reason for groups to band together - promotes peace

**Diebeck**
Human
Begins game as the wise man and is revealed as the extension of the ultimate evil and darkness who captures Lilia to destroy the world

**Figure 5.1: Arc the Lad: Twilight of the Spirits** Character relationship map

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than being focused on self-discovery, these foundling characters – like Lara Croft – are often in pursuit of an object. The quest becomes located in mercenary objectives that reduce character development and reject the more archetypal format suggested by Campbell. Croft single-mindedly pursues the pieces of the Scion in *Tomb Raider*. As her quest progress, the need to recover all the pieces expands to encompass personal payback as well as the mercenary goal. With the interference from the Natla Corporation, Lara becomes angry and vows to retrieve the object in spite of her former employer. This shift in the quest formula still places the character on a journey but there is less need for aid along the way. For the young hero, such as Darc or Kharg, change is a key force in the journey, requiring mentors and tricksters to accomplish such transformation. For the established traveler, such as Lara Croft, the quest is less about internal growth and more concerned with external objectives such as money or power.

In both cases the use of the quest as a common game theme is evident. As characters exist in melodramatic fairy tale worlds, they must journey forth, searching for answers or gold. For the player, the game itself is a quest. He/she seeks to solve the puzzles and battle the monsters in order to win. This journey, sometimes encompassing massive amounts of time, is a mirror image of the character’s passage. The player treks through his/her imagination, allowing the world of the game to become his/her own.

**The Element of Danger – Kill or Be Killed**

Finally, the element of danger is central to the dynamics of the game world. In melodrama, the hero/heroine must encounter multiple perils, continually living on the edge of danger. Seeing how the heroine escapes from an approaching train or how the hero miraculously saves a child in a burning building has the potential to thrill,
fascinating the audience. Escaping the mundane, such heightened existence is what entices the audience to remain focused on the story. Video games, which have a considerably longer playing time than theatrical melodrama, use the sense of impending danger to keep the player active and entertained. Game designers create hordes of enemies to guarantee a steady stream of random battles that the player must face in the course of the quest.

To that end the violence inherent in games is a key factor in generating this climate of danger and risk. The player must either “kill or be killed” in the course of the game. In dying, the player loses the time and effort invested in playing as well as possibly suffering an emotional loss due to the character’s untimely demise. In RPGs, groups roam the virtual world moving from village to village. In the course of that journey, random enemy encounters occur, immediately throwing the party into battle, constantly at risk of being harmed or even killed with no foreknowledge. As parties travel through dungeons, a major engagement (also known as a boss battle) is inevitable but its timing and location is not necessarily known. This element of surprise keeps the player focused, constantly monitoring his characters to make sure they can survive the encounter. Some RPGs add the element of puzzles and traps to further complicate the player’s travels, heightening the tension. In third person action and first person shooters, the player is generally working his/her way through the dungeon while continually encountering enemies. Without fail these enemies attack the player, forcing conflict. In

17 In the course of game play it is not uncommon to spend several hours to ‘win’ a level or to get through a dungeon. The death of the character returns the player back to the last saved spot within the game which can mean a considerable loss of time. The emotional loss is less important and less viable as players are often unable to achieve empathy with their characters as previously discussed in Chapter 4.
*Tomb Raider*, Lara travels through the first environment in Tibet, solving puzzles and battling wildlife only to be attacked by a rival tomb raider at the end of the level. This skirmish pushes the player, amplifying the tension, to survive the battle rather than die and be forced back to the beginning of the level.

Beyond the continual confrontations, games generate a sense of danger by drawing on the deepest fears of the collected psyche. One method of manifesting this lies in the types of creatures faced by the heroes. Rotted corpses, wolves, dinosaurs, demons, and more creatures of myth are given form in the game world visually representing nightmares in digital form. The worlds which support these violence filled journeys also support this psychological assault. Some worlds resemble the fairy tale horrors of the Brothers Grimm, creating dank dungeons, murky swamps, and ruined castles. Others draw on the *Alien* fears of deep space in which ‘no one can hear you scream’. These worlds are vast and empty. Still others use the modern settings of mansions, corporations, and hospitals to provide sterile environments irrevocably altered by the presence of zombies and other perverted creatures of darkness. These environments are extensions of the imagination, augmenting the danger already present from the violent surroundings. The creatures, their environment, and the continual threat of violence serve to heighten the player’s interest and to further the element of danger within the game.

**Spectacle: Painted Flats and Texture Maps**

The use of spectacle in melodrama is a quintessential component of its success. As we saw earlier with Gerould’s discussion of special effects in theatrical melodrama, one of the genre’s specialties were ‘sensational scenes’ with “train-wrecks, fires, snow-
storms, steamship explosions, and avalanches.”  

The use of illusion in theatre, creating ‘realistic spectacle,’ has long been the hallmark of theatrical design. All the elements of design, scene, light, costume, and sound, contribute to creating the fictional space. In developing these illusions, designers seek to interpret the written into a visual/aural representation that will convince the audience to suspend their disbelief, voluntarily joining in the experience of the moment. A variety of tools – perspective, trompe l’oeil painting, colored lights, dramatic sounds, and fantastic fabrics – are used to create these spectacles. Scholar W. B. Worthen identifies the types of nineteenth century performance focused on spectacle as: “cataclysmic melodrama, Irving’s splendid ‘historical’ Shakespeare, the glitter and panache of pantomime and extravaganza.”  

These showcases of the sensational were driven by the technology of the times. Presented on proscenium stages employing lighting and scenic technologies, melodrama created what Worthen calls the “pictorial, ‘photographic’ objectivity” of modern realism.  

Late nineteenth century design was fixated on this spectacular realism and melodrama could be considered an extreme manifestation, testing the limits of the believable.  

But the fascination with realism became a dead end for many theatre artists with the advent of film. Able to recreate the sensational with more verisimilitude than stage, the cinematic medium forced theatre artists to reevaluate realism in relation to design. Already disillusioned with spectacle, designers Adolphe Appia (1862-1928) and Edward  

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20 Worthen, Modern Drama and the Rhetoric of Theater. 15.
Gordon Craig (1872-1966) became the two prominent voices for the new stage design of the early twentieth century. Both sought a theatrical design that rejected the illusion of realism, instead pressing for an organic space that used light and scenery to create a space for performance that is supportive of the text while allowing room for the imagination to roam. As Appia explains, “A spectacle becomes a work of art only when its connected parts are systematically ‘modified’ in their relationships.” Both men created designs based on simple geometric structures of a three-dimensional physical space.

In games, the need for spectacle is much like melodrama, demanding the same train wrecks and avalanches, translated for a virtual space. A primary goal for the game designer is to create a world. That world must be recognizable to the player, holding some elements of conventional reality, while still being visually and aurally engaging. The creation of game worlds relies on an understanding of the real physical world to allow for the fluid transfer of the real into the virtual. Like their nineteenth century predecessors, modern game designers also have a fascination with spectacular realism. This fascination can best be understood by remembering that the virtual is a place of potential rather than merely a non-real space. Early game designers, constrained by the limitations of an infant technology, were forced to create a symbolic reality within which actions took place. It was necessary to reduce visual landscapes and harrowing spectacles to “information channels between rational actors that calculate and manipulate

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symbols.” As technology advanced, designers were able to expand the visual and aural components of game sets into more hyper-real, pictorial representations of the ‘real’ environments and events. Unwittingly, the design aesthetic evidenced a reverse evolution, initially using the ‘new’ stage design of the twentieth century theatre in the nineteenth century model of melodrama.

As stage machinery drove the spectacle scenes of melodrama, the graphic capabilities of computers guided the development of early games. Originally graphics within games were limited to two-dimensional representations of space, just as nineteenth century theatre used painted drops and flats, to create an illusion of three-dimensional space. Similar to the painted flats of theatrical history, the early game designs treated space in a cumbersome fashion, producing cartoon-like images. As technological constraints fell away with the development of hardware and software, the graphic representation of realism became a central concern for game designers. Games increasingly focused on mirroring the real. With the development of three-dimensional graphic space, presenting height, depth, and width sensibilities, game designers attempted to emulate reality. The games of the mid to late nineties, such as *Tomb Raider* and *Resident Evil* demonstrate this trend towards three-dimensional graphic realism.

Ideally, games are organic living space in which the player can roam and explore without the guidelines of prescribed blocking. The space should be organic to suit the interactive nature of the game. It is uncanny that the work of Appia and Craig, from the early twentieth century, has a strong visual connection to certain types of games. Both

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22 Jesper Taekke, "Cyberspace as a Space Parallel to Geographical Space," *Virtual Space: Spatiality in Virtual Inhabited 3D Worlds*, ed. Lars Qvortrup (London: Springer, 2002) 37. Note the use the term actor although this is a divorced discussion of virtual space in relation to science.
focused on mood and a sense of place that is grounded in an idea of the real rather than in the actuality. In the simple, clean lines of Appia’s and Craig’s theatrical designs, one can see a similarity between this treatment of physical space and the creation of endless levels in the virtual space of shooter games such as *Tomb Raider* and *Doom*.

The creation of game space is based on an arrangement of polygonal shapes in space, providing an architectural frame that is later detailed by artistically treating the surfaces (or maps) with color and texture. The process of building virtual worlds can be explained as follows:

For many creators of virtual worlds it seems like the true modeling of the real world and the perfect realism is a specific goal they try to reach. The idea is very simple: the ground plane is a square and on top of that a digital height model and a texture for the finish is place. The plane is surrounded by a horizon scrim that has a landscape and sky mapped onto it.\(^{23}\)

This reliance on simplicity is similar to Appia’s and Craig’s designs in relation to theatre. Once the bare physical space is created, the designers seek to provide the details of reality to the digital space. With textures, lighting effects and animation the designer seeks to flesh the virtual frame in a realistic mode. Yet the question facing designers is what measure they should use to gauge their interpretation of the real. Is the measure of these virtual realities the real world or the photorealistic world?\(^{24}\) In both cases, the photorealistic world of film creates a level of expectation for realistic spectacle that neither theatre nor games can match. The attempt to compete with filmic realism is defeated by the inability of games or theatre to capture the essence of real as well as the


photographic lens. Instead, the focus on designing spectacle requires a shift from realism to symbolism, from trying to replicate reality to trying to suggest it. Game designers have the opportunity to learn from their theatrical predecessors that less can be more, and that audiences need space for their imaginations to work.

Games continue to use realism as the ideal of spectacle. Among the newest titles are several games connected to films. These Hollywood blockbusters such as The Matrix and The Lord of the Rings trilogies have created games that use the film experience, to create visual/aural designs for the game version. This allows players to re-enact the roles that they witnessed onscreen. Television also expands to the game world with titles inspired by Alias and Buffy the Vampire Slayer. These films and shows are rich melodramatic spectacles finding new life in the game industry.

In opposition to this realistic style, new games such as XIII (2003) and Viewtiful Joe (2003) employ ways to create game environments. XIII is a cel-shaded first person shooter which draws on a French comic book of the same name for its artistic style. Each shot in the game resembles a comic book image or a hand-shaded (colored) animation frame. Viewtiful Joe returns to the two-dimensional graphic style of the past, employing bright colors and comic character designs to entice the viewer. The graphic composition once again resembles a comic book, but the visual appearance of this work is closer to the superhero comics of X-Men or Batman as opposed to the darker, film noir style of XIII. Both have been relatively successful although they do not feature the realism of the cinematic games. Instead, the use of more symbolic and artistic graphics appeals to a different taste for spectacle.
Another theatrical designer, Robert Edmund Jones (1887-1954), presents a slightly different design aesthetic, combining the organic nature of Appia and Craig with the desire for spectacle. In 1941 he wrote, “When I go to the theatre, I want to get an eyeful. [...] I want my imagination to be stimulated by what I see onstage”\(^{25}\). For Jones, the theatre is transformed by the visual possibilities found in cinema and photorealism. Instead of returning to realism or simply rejecting it, Jones calls for a type of compromise – a symbolic theatre. In *The Dramatic Imagination* he predicted a cinematically driven theatre that relied on visual symbolism to propel its spectacle rather than realism. Jones states:

> Our dramatists now have it in their power to enlarge the scope of their dramas to an almost infinite extent by the use of these moving and speaking images. Some new playwright will presently set a motion-picture screen on the stage above and behind his actors and will reveal simultaneously two worlds of the Conscious and the Unconscious which together make up the world we live in – the outer world in the inner world, the objective world of actuality in the subjective world of motive. On the stage we shall see the actual characters of the drama; on the screen we shall see their hidden secret selves. The drama will express the behavior of the characters set against a moving background, the expression of their subconscious mind – a continuous action and interaction.\(^{26}\)

For Jones, this grafting of cinematic technique onto theatrical design is a reflection of the unconscious, the unreal which creates a new sense of design. His symbolic treatment of space can be applied to game design combining the graphic limitations that inspired sparse environments and the compelling need for realistic portrayals of characters and worlds. Jones’s symbolic theatre is particularly appropriate for game design; he advocated the idea of scenic space as environmental rather than being a static location.


\(^{26}\) Jones, 18-19.
For Jones, this environment is represented as the mind’s eye, a presence in and of itself.\(^{27}\) Once designed this environment supports the performer, while at the same time it gives meaning to the story.

The world of a game is an environment of choice in which the player controls the order in which he/she explores space. The reflection of the unconscious that Jones calls for as a theatrical backdrop is the mood created by the physical space in the game. Instead of being limited by the photorealistic, the game design should seek to be effective dramatically. The environment must be visually interesting and appealing, not just realistic, and a desire to explore its mysteries can further seduce and lure the player’s interest. *Myst* is a prime example; without any other characters’ interaction or intervention, the lushly symbolic and atmospheric environment is perhaps the greatest mystery of the game. Theatre and games share this ability to evoke imagination and action in response to symbol and environment, and neither benefit from attempting to ape the photorealism that is the province of film.

In addition to the visual, both Appia and Jones call for an awareness of the aural dimension as an environmental element. For Appia, music is distinct from the rest of the design. Music, for Appia, expresses time rather than space.\(^{28}\) For Jones the use of sound is linked to enhancing the dramatic word of the play, strengthening the presence of the performers onstage.\(^{29}\) Both men indicate that sound is key to establishing mood and

\(^{27}\) Jones, 23-27.

\(^{28}\) Appia, 210. Appia’s fascination with music permeates his writings but this essay on theatrical production points to music as interconnected with the concept of the dramatic idea, connecting inner essence with physical movements and expressions.

\(^{29}\) *The Dramatic Imagination* (New York: Theatre Arts Books, [1941] 1994) 139-140. Jones is focused on the possibilities created by recording techniques similar to those of radio plays, creating spatial references and emotional sensibilities through sound effects mixed with the human voice.
conveying a sense of time and place in the symbolic theatre. Game design has embraced the power of sound for this purpose, unknowingly following the suggestions of Appia and Craig. With film as a model, games have always used music and effects. Character themes and environmental ambiences are aurally present in games, providing a dramatic underscore that, similar to theatrical melodrama, escalates tension and adds to the pervasive element of danger. In game design, the emphasis is on both realism and idea, blending sound effects with underscoring to create non-realistic representations of human emotions and experiences. The use of music and effects in the game world generates ambience and environment while utilizing scoring techniques to lead players on an emotional journey.

With the advent of virtual spectacle, texture maps and polyons have replaced the painted flat to create the sensational scenes of *Grand Theft Auto III, Final Fantasy X-2*, and more. As designers strive to present a perceptible reality, they unwittingly create environments that parallel the aesthetics of twentieth century theatrical design. Reality is simulated through the creation of a closed environment, “a set of perceptions that are sufficient to represent an experience and to absorb the conscious mind.” As technology continues to develop, the shift in the industry, which appears to be leaning towards more massive multi-player games as well as more communal environments, promises to further impact the design of game space. As environment designer Don Carson remarks,

“…with the growing popularity of multiplayer and internet games, computer environments are treading on a realm, until now, reserved for the physical world. Many thousands of people are connecting and participating

in these virtual worlds with total strangers for one reason…namely, the allure of the ‘shared’ experience. A chance to make a human connection in these new worlds and to be able to say, “HEY! Did you see THAT?”

The current crop of games on the market draws from a variety of sources to generate game spectacle. From anime to comic books to realistic three-dimensional portrayals of the human form, games pull from other arts to continually reinvent spectacle to create Carson’s human connection through graphic splendor. Yet, much as theatre design experienced a revolution in the early twentieth century, game design is now on the brink of a similar visual dilemma. As the game world strives to be real with pixilated versions of Jennifer Garner and Keanu Reeves in the *Alias* and *Matrix* games, the gap between real and virtual is blatantly evident. Will the taste for spectacle continue to drive the gaming industry, focusing on the real, or will there be a demand for more sophisticated character and plot development, propelling a new direction for game design which might take advantage of the ideas already explored and integrated into the selective realism and symbolic stage design of theatre?

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CHAPTER 6

CLOSING THE LOOP: QUESTIONS OF THE SPECT-ACTOR

All movies, all books transport the person entertained into another place, if it's done well. What's great about video games is that they're interactive. Not only are you involved in the story - you're affecting the outcome. ---John Riccitiello, president of Electronic Arts

Take Bridget Goldstein, a 40-year-old school trustee who lives in Pasadena, Calif. Every night starting about 10, after she's put her two children to bed, she spends a couple of hours playing Everquest as Nin Lyrael, a buxom, flirtatious bard who can fly and slay dragons with equal aplomb. 'It's no different from losing yourself in a good book, [but here] you're the star, and you have slim hips and no stretch marks.'

We play games. We always have. As the scholar Johan Huizinga points out, “Play is older than culture.” It is inherent in our nature. From childhood into adulthood, mankind uses play to transcend reality, breaking from the mundane to experience the extraordinary. Huizinga points to ‘dressing up’ as the highest level of this, suggesting that the donning of disguise or mask equals perfection of play – becoming another being.

The culture of play remains strong within our society. It is simply the manner of play

3 Johan Huizinga, Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture (Boston: Beacon Press, 1950) 1. Huizinga also notes that animals also ‘play’ adopting certain mock behaviors in much the same way as children do when playing games of make-believe.
4 Huizinga, 13. This perfection is also supported by the specific time frame and ‘rules’ of play, providing a safe environment for the player to function within. In that safety lies the attraction of escaping the ‘real’ world.
that is changing, adapting to the mediatized culture of the present. The video game is, as named by media theorist Douglas Rushkoff, a “mediated dream space,”5 which allows individuals to join in fictional realities to play ‘dress up’ and to pursue a hero’s quest unavailable in modern society. To play the game is to perform it due to its interactive nature. Having examined video games from perspectives of space, structure, character, and content, it is only natural to return to the player as the final point of discussion.

The video game player of today is a performer. He/she is actively engaged in an interactive state that is both physical and mental, playing a character. Narrative, however simplistic, houses this performance in a virtual world, a performance space made of pixels that can allow an unlimited creative freedom. In order to consider the role of the game performer, I will use Janet Murray’s terms of immersion, agency, and transformation. Murray developed these terms in her book, *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997) to address the form and function of narrative within digital space. *Cyberdrama*, as she calls it, embraces the player, repositioning him/her from spectator to performer through these three states of change/interaction.

*Immersion* is connected to the physical sense of being submerged as well as the idea of sensory stimulation taken to an ultimate level of experience. This physical sensation is transferred to the experience of computer-generated sensory stimulation. The immersion into digital media for Murray is located in the participatory nature of the experience as the user willingly submits to learning the rituals and patterns of the digital

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5 Douglas Rushkoff, *Playing the Future: What We Can Learn from Digital Kids* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1999) 178. This reference to games as dream space is connected to his Jungian interpretation of the archetypes of struggles presented in games. The dream space of games is, for Rushkoff, a reflection of the communal unconscious that has evolved due to the needs of society.
world. This willingness is akin to plunging into water, submerging oneself in the idea or environment to discover it.\footnote{Janet H. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 1997) 98-99.} Francois Laramee describes immersion in the video game as follows:

> Interactive entertainment can create immersion in a variety of ways. Games focusing on action, hand-eye coordination, and personal identification between the player and the hero will strive to create immersion through sensory input: realistic visuals, positional audio, force-feedback, dramatic acting, and so forth. Games of strategy will prefer intellectual immersion: information presented as a whole, often viewed from above, and players are fed a constant stream of abstract decisions to make.\footnote{Francois Dominic Laramee, ed, *Game Design Perspectives* (Hingham, MA: Charles River Media, Inc., 2002) 61.}

Both Murray and Laramee suggest that immersion is dependent on the player’s ability to identify with the game environment. The process of identification allows the player to ‘willingly suspend his/her disbelief’ becoming a part of the virtual environment.

*Agency* is the power to take action within that digital world. In taking action, we expect to see the results of the decision-making process.\footnote{Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* 126.} Agency is one of the primary connections to the participatory or interactive component of gaming. In having agency, the gamer is active in the game. His/her actions have an appropriate and understandable impact on the world around them. Ken Perlin explains agency by pointing out what it is not, specifying the differences between agency when reading a book and playing a game as follows:

> So, there is something very particular about the way the novel, in all its many variants, goes about its business. By telling us a story, it asks us to set aside our right to make choices - our agency. Instead, the agency of the protagonist takes over, and we are swept up in the observation of his struggle, more or less from his point of view, as though we were some invisible spirit.
or angel perched upon his shoulder, watching but never interfering.

By way of contrast, look at games. A game does not force us to relinquish our agency. In fact, the game depends on it.  

Perlin focuses as a more specific extension of interaction between player and character, demanding viable dramatic characters to achieve an emotional tie between player and character. For it is in this emotional connection that desire for agency exists according to Perlin. As a result of this, Perlin suggests that agency is intimately connected with acting. Agency necessitates an ‘emotional buy-in’ for the player to connect with the character. The creation and performance of the digital avatar now requires the ability to act to successfully achieve player agency.

Finally, transformation is the ability to assume any form that we wish in the digital domain. This shedding of the physical body to become another gender, race, or creature seems to be an exhilarating, liberating experience and for many is perhaps one of the primary reasons for the success of the game industry. Transformation, it goes without saying, is intimately connected to theatre. Dionysus, the god of wine and theatre, is a creature who transforms and his ability to do so was recognized by the ancient Greeks in their theatre festivals. Performance theorist Richard Schechner describes the performer’s ability to transform as follows:

The performer goes from the 'ordinary world' to the 'performative world,' from one time/space reference to another, from one personality to one or more others. He plays a character, battles demons, goes into a trance, travels to the sky or under the sea or earth: he is transformed, enabled to do things 'in performance' he cannot do ordinarily.

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His definition of transformation matches with Murray’s but suggests that the player is changed by the experience of play/performance. Transformation is a result of the process of immersion and capacity for agency. In willingly entering the digital domain the player is open to the possibility of change. With that immersion, the player assumes a character, able to take action or to have agency within the game. Between the two, the player is transformed, changed by the playing of the game. All three of Murray’s concepts add to Huizinga’s idea of dressing up in his discussion of human play.

Murray’s concepts are located in her idea of narrative from an intellectual position. In contrast is Augusto Boal’s concept of the spect-actor which firmly locates performance in the physical, in the flesh and blood, in the corporeal. As audience becomes actors, the theatre becomes interactive, fluid and changeable in ways never previously imagined by Aristotle and others. Because of the generally sedentary nature of the video game, many do not see game playing as physical. Gamers are viewed as another species of television ‘couch potatoes.’ However, games were once physical, on your feet, performances in public space in arcades, pizza parlors, and bars. While many think this physical connection is passé, there is a resurgence of the physical aspect. In the recent film *Lost in Translation* (2003), there is a brief clip of a Japanese video game

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12 Schechner also uses the term ‘transportation’ in his discussion of the performer. Transportation implies that the actor experiences a cyclical journey in performance, returning to his/her original state at the end of the experience. Transformation is intertwined with change, instead suggesting that the performer is forever changed by the experience of performing. For Schechner, transportation is more connected with theatre although he admits that the line between the two is difficult to draw. In relation to games, I feel that transformation is appropriate if the player has experienced immersion and agency. Those factors generate a climate conducive to long lasting change rather than in-the-moment experience.
arcade where several people gather to watch one person play a game, *Dance, Dance, Revolution*, which requires a physical commitment from the player. As music plays and the characters onscreen dance, the gamer follows the moves of the virtual characters, stepping in rhythm. As players become more proficient, their own sense of motion and style adds to the demands of the game. This in turn creates a new dance performance that is observed by others in the arcade space. This type of phenomenon is slowly working its way to America as physically interactive games return to arcades and bars.

In the home games like the *Eye Toy* and *Lifeline* new alternative interfaces replace conventional joysticks. With *Lifeline*, the main character is controlled through voice commands using a headset. The *Eye Toy* uses the player’s entire body as the interface. Employing a small camera, the player sees his/herself on the screen and all the games are controlled through physical action such as waving a hand or kicking a foot. Using motion sensors, the game responds in real-time, allowing the player a sense of full-body engagement with the games. Most recently, a group of students at New York University developed and tested a new version of *Pac-Man* that incorporated several players in the real world being guided by gamers. The characters, Pac-Man and the ghosts, were set loose in the city. Players online tracked the human characters across a grid simulation of the city which resembled the traditional *Pac-Man* arcade grid with the addition of New York City street names. As characters ran through the streets of Manhattan, online players guided them via cell phones to create a real-time giant video game.\(^\text{13}\) Only time will tell how the game player/actor will develop, but it will be interesting to see how Murray’s concepts of immersion, agency, and transformation continue to define and

shape the playing experience. With the growth in emerging technologies, Murray’s and Boal’s theories offer methods of understanding the performative element of game play.

I would like to end my consideration of the connection between theatre and video games with various “calls to action,” most of which come from leaders of the game world. In recognizing theatrical parallels between the theatre world and game world, both industries gain insight and knowledge of their own limitations and possibilities for the future. Leading game designers, such as Chris Crawford, call for dramatic changes in the game industry. As Crawford states:

We’ll also need a new class of storyteller: someone who understands interactivity as well as story, and who does not shirk from the minor programming demanded by the development environment…all this will require major breaks with the past. We need new technology, new creative talent, and a new marketplace. It’s going to be a tough slog - but what revolution wasn’t a tough slog?14

It is my belief that a new class of storyteller can emerge if the game world starts to consider theatre as a viable source for creative structures and character analysis.

None of the three theatrical structural models provides an exact pattern card for games narratives. Instead, by drawing parallels between theatre and game structures a new discourse can develop to strengthen plot structures. Each theorist – Aristotle, Brecht, and Boal – contributes a greater understanding to the relevant genres. Just as theatre has continually examined itself critically, so must games. The problem with existing constructions is expressed by game designer Randy Littlejohn as follows,

But in terms of actual game design...there's little attempt or little interest in interweaving non-linear story elements, strong character development and the principles of drama into interactive designs. This hampers appealing

to a mass audience as much as the insistence on developing interactive
entertainments by game-think alone.\textsuperscript{15}

Through Aristotle, Brecht, and Boal it is possible to see how current games are
functioning in relation to existing structural models. Furthermore, game genres – third
person action, role playing, and massive multiplayer online role play – can be seen as
theatrical. Such comparisons address the weaknesses in these genres and can point the
way to different means of storytelling.

For example, to achieve a more powerful dramatic engagement, the third person
action game must develop more than one obstacle to be overcome, rather than revisiting
the same obstacle repeatedly with a higher level of challenge. To create a more complex
narrative in linear structure, Aristotle indicates the addition of reversal and recognition to
generate pathos. With such additions to the plot and character, the plot becomes
complex. If the action of the third person action genre employed such techniques,
characters such as Lara Croft would be a much more complicated and interesting to the
player. The development towards complexity requires a shift in plot and character
structure within the genre. To fully utilize Aristotelian structure, game designers must
revisit the ideas of dramatic conflict, pathos, and consider the need for engaging the
emotions of the player beyond the simple triumphs and frustrations of physical challenges
and mental puzzles.

In relation to Brecht, the RPG is limited by its own fantastical subject matter.
Games are the hedonistic pleasures of the current generation. Much like the opera that
Brecht scorned as ‘pleasure merchandise,’ games are for the most part escapist

\textsuperscript{15} Randy Littlejohn, "Agitating for Dramatic Change,". \textit{Gamasutra} 29 Oct. 2003, 19 Nov. 2003
entertainments. Such an insistence on mindless fun makes it difficult for games to engage in the social and political questions that Brecht placed at the root of his Epic Theatre. In *FFVII*, Cloud is a worker caught in the trap of corporate plotting and subterfuge. Objectified by the system, Cloud is at the mercy of an overwhelming world. At the game’s conclusion is the player, like Brecht’s ideal, incited to action? The tedium of playing over 60 hours reduces the player’s ability to think about the game’s content, instead narrowing his/her focus simply to “beating” the obstacles, to “winning” the game. The final cut scene neatly provides an ending that nullifies an intellectual response to the questions of corporate greed and class struggle and an opportunity is lost to make a connection to these issues in today’s world.

With Boal, the evolving online realities are limited by the question of embodiment. Boal’s first two stages of evolution require a physical presence. The virtual realms of the massive multiplayer are unable to allow the physical presence in the game world although the digital avatar is steadily becoming more and more customizable. Is this presence enough to create the immediacy of community and presence inherent in Boal’s theatre in the virtual world of Godrana? In experiencing the world of *Everquest* can this truly be a forum that deals with ‘real’ issues when the world of the game, although economically and politically viable, is virtual? For Boal the environment that surrounds the forum is integral and lacking in spectacle. It is the place of discussion, stripped of pretense. Yet in the virtual reality of MMORPGs, worlds are spectacular to allow for greater sense of immersion and involvement in the created narrative.
The balance between player immersion and interaction has become difficult to maintain. As games develop, the type of player is changing. As with theatrical audiences, the form of the entertainment is often a reflection of audience demand and taste. Early interactions in MUDs were more leisurely, allowing for greater engagement and communication among players. More modern design, drawing from RPGs, stresses script driven challenges to motivate interaction while reducing ‘wasted time’ spent in exploration. In an interview with George Jones, consultant Richard Bartle points to another problem in structural designs as follows:

[…] so many MMORPGs have become so intently focused on automating and artificially motivating players to engage in the game-world that at times, the experience feels a little too "Disneyfied." The world is virtual, but the players are real. […] The relationships between the players should not be treated like they, too, were virtual.”

For Bartle, the lack of humanity within these virtual worlds is enhanced by a fascination with simulacrum, the ability of the designers to push for a hyper-reality. This compulsion to be real causes a cleanliness in designs that eradicates the imperfections of the human. There is a flatness and flimsiness to these virtual worlds that distorts the potential for Boal’s socially relevant rehearsal for social and political change. It is hard to make a revolution with Mickey Mouse.

With character, the comparison between theatrical characters and game characters exposes weaknesses in the development of foundlings, class selection, and character generation models. Against the dramatic analysis of Thomas, complexity and will are most often lacking in the construction of character in games. As Perlin points out, the

lack of dramatic viability in game characters reduces the player’s capacity for emotion and hence his/her interest in agency.\textsuperscript{17} Although the visual world of games provides lush and fully-developed physical shells, the characters themselves lack the depth and dimension available to theatrical scripts. Additionally, the non-playable characters, which are routinely weak and two-dimensional, reinforce stereotypes and further reduce the player’s connection with the game. The theatrical model of character analysis opens a new means of examining characters in hopes of creating well-rounded, believable roles that can be acted by the player. In creating dramatic characters, the possibility for empathy and the resulting agency suggests a more robust and engaging gaming culture that appeals to a greater number of players.

It is in melodrama that the roots of game stories exist. Recognizing the devices of religion, quest, danger, and spectacle, the game industry can identify and improve on the existing patterns. Stephen Poole suggests that the appeal of the game lies in this very capacity:

To begin to guess how videogames might become more sophisticated in the future, remember what they are really good at. Games will never be as good as films at telling stories visually. They'll never be as good as books at weaving cerebral tapestries of ideas and human lives. But videogames are already extremely good at providing an exhilarating blast of animal emotions. Fear and triumph - that is why you play a videogame at the moment.\textsuperscript{18}

Poole even hints at the main concepts of melodrama, ‘fear and triumph’, as the strengths of the game. With such connections, the game industry can only benefit by looking at the

\textsuperscript{17} Ken Perlin, "Can There Be a Form Between a Game and a Story?" \textit{First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game}, ed. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan (Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2004) 13-14

model of melodrama, reconnecting with the form that the industry has unwittingly appropriated.

By viewing the gamer as a performer, the industry allows the theatrical to enter the world of gaming. That entry can only improve the performance capabilities of games. By applying the principles of theatrical performance to the gaming experience, the gamer is supported as an actor. Just as a theatrical performer must have the support of good writing, direction, and design, the gamer requires a similar investment from the game design team. The gamer as spect-actor is an engaged participant in a dramatic, interactive experience.

The centuries long traditions of theatre have the potential for new life in games. Likewise, the game world offers a new arena for theatre professionals. With the continuing growth of technology and the expansion of the game industry, theatre has a renewed opportunity to align itself with digitized media in the evolution of creative expression. I finish this dissertation with another quote from Stephen Poole:

We should not find [the drive to play] so surprising, because man, after all is the symbolic animal. And this is exactly what videogames celebrate, challenge, and feed. It's no dumb accident that they appeared: once the technology was lying around, they simply had to happen. As Nolan Bushnell, the father of commercial videogaming, puts it dryly, videogames arose out of a natural wish to 'make computers do fun things'. In this sense, they are an historically inevitable evolution of the play drive. To play a video game is only human.

To win, of course, is divine.¹⁹

Games are theatrical – combining performance, design, and playwriting – and to ignore that kinship is short sighted. To conclude I want to return to the beginning: the title of

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¹⁹ Poole, Trigger Happy: Videogames and the Entertainment Revolution 203.
In my research. In the fairy tale of Beauty and the Beast, the ugly beast is a prince trapped by a witch’s spell. In order to become human again, a woman must tell him she loves him. While Beauty grows fond of Beast despite herself, she is just as surprised as he is when she utters those words – ‘I love you’ – that then enacts his transformation. Each is changed in his/her acceptance of the other. Beauty ‘civilizes’ Beast, humanizing him and reshaping him. Beast forces Beauty to look beyond the surface, finding the potential underneath the rough, course exterior. From theatre – The Beauty of my work – can come the potential to make games better, more challenging and more emotionally engaging. From games – The Beast – can come new means of communicating and winning audiences. Beauty and Beast have much to offer and much to learn from one another. May it be an interesting partnership.
APPENDIX A

GAME GENRES INFORMATION
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Defining Characteristics</th>
<th>Sample Titles</th>
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</thead>
</table>
| **Action** | Rely heavily on hand-eye coordination. Usually very little story or strategy. Fast-paced and reflex-oriented. This is a large label which encompasses multiple subgenres such as the FPS and 3rd person action as well as some fighting games. | **Quake**  
**Mortal Kombat** |
| **Adventure Games a.k.a. Quest Games** | Modeled on the idea of a journey in which the player character undergoes various adventures, from meeting and slaying monsters to finding treasure, acquiring weapons, and solving puzzles, all in pursuit of a purpose that is usually set out at the beginning, such as rescuing a captive or overthrowing an evil power or 'boss'. | **Zork**  
**Myst**  
**Zelda** |
| **Fighting Games** | Subset of action games in which two players (or the player and a computer-generated character) fight each other in single combat. Some such combats are hand-to-hand duels between the players' onscreen characters, but more often they involve the use of elaborate and often alien or supernatural weapons. Players can normally choose their onscreen character from a small group of preconfigured roles, each with its own special abilities. | **Mortal Kombat**  
**Tekken**  
**Street Fighter** |
| **God Games** | Subset of strategy games in which the player manages an entire civilization instead of individual characters. The evolution of the civilization is represented onscreen as the player tweaks various settings, ranging from geography to economics, religion, and war. Usually the player sees the world as a god would—looking down on it from above. | **Sim... Series**  
**Pharaoh**  
**Zeus**  
**Black & White** |
| **Maze Games** | Games that consist entirely of chasing things (or being chased) around a maze of some kind. | **Pac-Man** |
| **Multiplayer Games** | Game theorists distinguish between one-person, two-person, and n-person games. Solitaire is a one-person game; chess a two-person game; Monopoly an n-person game (it can be played by two, but it isn't for only two as chess is). Many games have an optimum number of players; it's difficult, for example, to play poker enjoyably with more than about six or seven people. The term multiplayer game is essentially a synonym for n-person games but is used almost exclusively with reference to computer games. In particular, it often refers to the kinds of networked computer games that allow large and variable numbers of people to log in and play together over the net. Online role-playing games can have thousands of users who may spend hundreds of hours a month on the game, and for this reason the larger games are termed massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs). | **Quake**  
As a multiplayer option – not considered MMO  
**EverQuest**  
**Ultima Online**  
**Warcraft Series** |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Example Games</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nurturing Games</td>
<td>Games in which the player takes care of a virtual pet that may be anything from a chicken to an alien species. The pet thrives or dies depending on how well the player manages its needs, which generally include such basic activities as eating, play, and sleep.</td>
<td>Pokemon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Puzzle Games a.k.a. Classic Games</td>
<td>Chief activity is solving logical problems and puzzles, especially those that involve manipulating geometric shapes.</td>
<td>Tetris</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Role-Playing Games a.k.a. RPGs   | Games in which the player controls and develops a pseudonymous character over a period of time. Players pursue a range of activities, including keeping track of their character's 'stats' (such as age and strength), exploring, training in new skills, collecting weapons and treasure, and fighting non-player characters (often monsters of various kinds). In networked role-playing games, players can also socialize with other players, which they're normally supposed to do 'in character'. They often have exceptionally complex storylines, and some network RPGs are in a continuous state of development, with new terrain, treasures, and monsters constantly being added. | Final Fantasy Series  
Chrono Cross  
XenoGears  
Neverwinter Nights |
| Shooters                         | Type of fighting game in which the main activity is shooting down enemies (such as fighter planes or alien spaceships) and avoiding being shot down oneself. As one progresses from level to level in these games, the weapons on both sides usually get more elaborate and powerful. Most often referenced as first person shooters (FPS) due to the visual range of the player – limited as through seen through the character’s eyes. | BattleZone  
Doom  
Quake |
| Simulation Games a.k.a. SIM games| Term used for any kind of game in which real-world activities are modeled as convincingly as possible, typically with a wealth of specialized detail. Many of these are action games that put the player in the driver's seat of some vehicle like a ship, car, or fighter jet; these vehicles can be real or imaginary. However, the term also covers games in which other kinds of real-life activities are simulated, such as deer hunting, running a war, or evolving life on earth. | SimLife  
Wing Commander  
Deer Hunter |
| Sports                           | Single player or team game using realism and tactical strategy.              | Football  
Baseball  
Basketball |
### Strategy Games

Games in which players attempt to beat other players or computer-generated characters with a combination of strategic action and problem-solving. Emphasize logical thinking and planning. Typically they are war games in which the players control forces of roughly equal strength and the goal is to conquer territory controlled by opponents by defeating their forces. One variation of this genre is known as real-time strategy (RTS) which emphasizes the need for quick thinking as well as adaptability.

**Age of Empires**

**Warcraft**

**Starcraft**

### Third Person Action

A derivative of the action game and the FPS genre in which the player’s view encompasses the body of the character from an ‘over-the-shoulder’ perspective. These games employ more story than the FPS and rely heavily on journeying through multiple ‘dungeons’ to level-up and/or progress in the course of the game. Often related use horror as a genre for storytelling.

**Tomb Raider**

**Resident Evil**

**Primal**

**Fatal Frame**

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This is my meld of concepts and definitions drawn from the following sources:


Much of this information is common knowledge in the gaming community, hence the amalgamation of sources.
This appendix contains information taken directly from the gaming materials which accompany the various games. It is included to provide a deeper sense of the games themselves while also showing the various means of conveying plot and character information to the gamer.

The information is keyed as follows:

**Title:** *The title of the game*

**Genre:** Main genre listing  
**2nd Genre:** Secondary genre listing

**Primary Platform:** The platform I used to research the game.  
**Other Platforms:** If applicable, this indicates the other platforms on which the game is available.

**Developer:** The company which created and developed the game

**Publisher:** The company which marketed and promoted the game

**Release Year:** Specific to the release in the United States

**Rating:** See Appendix C for an explanation of these ratings from the Entertainment Software Ratings Board

**Rating Descriptor:** The reasons the game received the rating, also explained in Appendix C

**Scenario:** The tag line and/or story synopsis provided in the game manual

**Characters:** The character descriptions and/or information provided in the game manual
Title: *Arc the Lad: Twilight of the Spirits*

Genre: RPG  
2nd Genre: None

Primary Platform: PlayStation2  
Other Platforms: None

Developer: Cattle Call
Publisher: Sony Computer Entertainment America
Release Year: 2003
Rating: T - Teen
Rating Descriptor: Alcohol Reference, Mild Language, and Violence

Scenario:

The tie that binds two men is one that could destroy their world.

For years, the Humans and Deimos have been at war in their struggle to capture the Great Spirit Stones. To the Humans, the stones represent a magical source of power and light. To the Deimos, the stones are the viable force behind their spell-casting abilities. But fate is about to place the future of both races in the hands of two men.

War of the Spirit Stones

Chaos and suffering are close on the horizon…and powerful spirits are about to play their hand! [sic]

For countless generations, Humans and Deimos have relied upon one natural resource – Spirit Stones. Both races mine the gems from sites around the world. To the Humans, the Stones are an energy source supplying warmth, light, and mechanical power. To the Deimos, Spirit Stones are the vital force empowering their magical abilities.

Aside from Spirit Stones, the Humans and Deimos have almost nothing in common. Centuries ago both races decided to ignore the other’s existence. Now each culture inhabits a different part of the world. On those rare occasions where Humans and Deimos clash, control of Spirit Stones is the reason.

To both Humans and Deimos, the most powerful treasures in the world are the five one-of-a-kind Great Spirit Stones, each representing one of the elemental powers of Water, Fire, Earth, Wind, and Light. If one being – Human or Deimos – were to possess all five stones, he would wield limitless power.

At this moment, a Human army is sweeping across the globe in an attempt to capture all five of these treasures and enslave every other being on the planet.
But the Spirits inhabiting the Great Spirit Stones will not let the future be decided so swiftly. Instead, they will place the fate of both races in the hands of two young warriors. One, named Kharg, lives a princely existence in the Human world. The other, Darc, is a lowly slave in the harsh Deimos civilization. He has suffered great hardship and carries a troubled heart. Each has sworn to defend his own world, and neither knows the other exists. Both these brave souls are unaware of the incredible powers they might soon possess.

Join the two young warriors as they carry out a solemn oath to defend their civilizations. Prepare your weapons, focus your magical powers and surround yourself with powerful allies.

It is time to battle the intruding darkness.

Characters:

The manual opts not to list the individual characters, instead revealing the characters in the course of the narrative. Also, the hint book does not list any character descriptions indicating this reveal as an important part of the game play experience. See Figure 5.1 for a listing of the characters and their relationships.
**Title:** Black & White  
**Genre:** God game  
**2nd Genre:** Strategy  
**Primary Platform:** PC  
**Other Platforms:** Mac

**Developer:** Lionhead Studios  
**Publisher:** EA Games  
**Release Year:** 2001  
**Rating:** T - Teen  
**Rating Descriptor:** Comic Mischief and Violence

**Scenario:**

People who need a god always get one. But they don’t always get the god they bargained for. In Black & White you are summoned to a new world by one single prayer. Ultimately, it will be the combined belief of your worshippers that determines how powerful you become.

How you decide to reign as a god is your decision. You may wish to be evil, gaining power as your people’s fear grows. Or, you may be benevolent, gaining their trust and love. Then again, you may be a combination of both, if you wish. It’s up to you to follow your conscience and rule as you see fit. In fact, your conscience, in the form of two Spiritual Advisors, appears throughout the game, giving you advice and trying to get you to reign over your land and people in ways you might not have considered.

But however you play Black & White, there are many challenges, huge quests and other gods to overcome before you can truly win the hearts and minds of all the tribes of Eden.

Expansions include:

*Creature Isle* (2002)

**Characters:**

The player is a god and is evident onscreen as a floating hand which can interact with the world.

The player also selects a creature to serve as his/her minion, doing the practical actions required in the world of Eden. The initial creature selection is a cow, a monkey, or a tiger, but the appearance of the creature changes over time to reflect the god’s personality. The *Creature Isle* expansion adds two more creatures the selection process, a crocodile and a rhinoceros.
Title: *Blood Rayne*

**Genre:** 3rd Person Action  
**2nd Genre:** Action  
**Primary Platform:** PlayStation2  
**Other Platforms:** X-Box, PC, GameCube

**Developer:** Terminal Reality  
**Publisher:** Majesco Games  
**Release Year:** 2002  
**Rating:** T - Teen  
**Rating Descriptor:** Blood and Gore, Strong Language, Violence

**Scenario:**

In 1932 an American teenage girl was apprehended in Europe after carving a path of destruction trying to track down and kill her biological father. The girl’s name was Rayne and she claimed the people she killed, and her father who was still at large, were vampires.

Before more information was attained, the girl disappeared.

That girl is a Dhampir; a product of her human mother’s rape by her vampire father. Born with powers of a vampire without all of the weaknesses. She was taken in by an underground organization calling themselves the Brimstone Society – a top-secret fraternity that hunts down and destroys supernatural threats. Agent BloodRayne, as she is now known, protects humanity from things that ordinary people shouldn’t have to deal with.

In the years between the World Wars, Agent BloodRayne works as a killing machine for The Brimstone Society. Two missions, five years apart, turn out to be connected by one man. For years, this man has been searching the world for powerful occult artifacts to bring Germany into a new age of domination. Agent BloodRayne must face this man’s elite Nazi army to prevent them from releasing creatures of unfathomable terror onto the world in their unwavering quest for the artifacts.

**Characters:**

**The Brimstone Society:** A very secret “fraternity” of individuals around the world that has a special interest in protecting humanity from supernatural threats. They took BloodRayne in to help with their mission.

**Mynce:** BloodRayne’s friend and mentor, Mynce is a Tibetan-born Dhampir with the same abilities as BloodRayne.
The Gegengheist Gruppe: The Gegengheist Gruppe, or GGG, literally translates to “anti-ghost group.” It is an elite faction established to seek out supernatural means of bringing Germany to power.

There are multiple villains in the game that are members of the GGG.
Title: *Dark Cloud*

Genre: Action RPG  
2nd Genre: RPG

Primary Platform: PlayStation2  
Other Platforms: None

Developer: Sony Computer Entertainment Inc.  
Publisher: Sony Computer Entertainment Inc.  
Release Year: 2000  
Rating: T - Teen  
Rating Descriptor: Violence, Comic mischief

Scenario:

Revival…of an ancient evil once banished.  
Rebirth…of a land once destroyed.  
Renewal…of a love once lost.

Two great continents, one an advanced civilization driven by progress and technology; the other, where nature is the center of all existence and everyone lives harmoniously side by side. Two cultures that have never had contact with each other…until now.

An ancient evil has been unleashed. Journey on a quest through time to unravel the mysterious tale of the Dark Cloud.

Characters:

**Toan**

The Spirit King grants Toan the power to recreate the world. Toan is the holder of the Atlamillia, the magic stone capable of storing the fragments of his world. Only Toan can capture the contents of Atla. He wields a variety of daggers and swords.

**Xiao**

The Spirit King turned a Norune house cat into a human warrior. Xiao fights with a slingshot. Her feline agility offers tremendous jumping skills.

**Ruby**

Ruby is a genie fresh out of a magic lamp. Ruby attacks with a variety of magic rings.
**Goro**

Goro is a hunter living in a tree house close to Poacher Village. He likes to use Axes, Hammers, and other heavy weapons, much like his father.

**Ungaga**

He is a legendary warrior among his people. Ungaga’s weapons are fighting staffs or spears.

**Osmond**

Osmond of the Moon People is armed with guns and lasers and he flies into battle with a Helopack on his back.
**Title: Dark Cloud 2**

**Genre:** Action RPG  
**2nd Genre:** RPG  
**Primary Platform:** PlayStation2  
**Other Platforms:** None

**Developer:** Level 5  
**Publisher:** Sony Computer Entertainment Inc.  
**Release Year:** 2003  
**Rating:** T - Teen  
**Rating Descriptor:** Violence

**Scenario:**

Behind its tightly closed gates, a peaceful mining town through which flows a slow, gentle breeze holds a mystery for the ages. A young inventor and a protector from the future begin their story here.

Throughout his many years in town, Maximilian, nor anyone else, has ever set foot outside of town. But the time has come for his long-cherished desire to leave and see the outside world.

Build your world. Invent your weapons. Create your adventure.

**Characters:**

**Maximilian**

An inventive young man who possesses a genius IQ and is the lone son to one of the wealthiest families in town. Rather than hanging around the mansion, he enjoys working in Cedrie’s Maintenance shop and inventing new creations more than anything else.

**Monica**

A skilled warrior from the future visits the present to Maximilian’s time. She skillfully wields a mystical sword and is a master of magic.

Other characters are encountered along the journey and have the option of joining Maximilian and Monica, but they are not playable characters.
Title: *EverQuest*

Genre: MMORPG  
2nd Genre: None

Primary Platform: PC  
Other Platforms: Mac

Developer: Sony Online Entertainment  
Publisher: Sony Online Entertainment

Release Year: 1999  
Rating: T - Teen

Rating Descriptor: Not given

Scenario:

Does not exist in the same manner as narrative based games. Instead, the game scenario is a lengthy document of the world of Norrath and how it functions. This information is included in the manual as well as online at *EverQuest Live*, the official website for the game: <http://eqlive.station.sony.com/>.

Expansions include:

- *Shadows of Luclin* (2001)

Characters:

Characters are generated by the player using the following steps:

Select a Race: Barbarian, Dark Elf, Dwarf, Erudite, Gnome, Half Elf, Halfling, High Elf, Human, Iksar, Ogre, Troll, Wood Elf

Select a Class (Occupation): Bard, Beastlord, Cleric, Druid, Enchanter, Magician, Monk, Necromancer, Paladin, Ranger, Rogue, Shadow Knight, Shaman, Warrior, Wizard

Allocate Ability Points: Agility, Charisma, Dexterity, Wisdom, Intelligence, Stamina, Strength

Select a facial appearance

Select a name
Pick a Deity: 16 major Deities, Sub-Deities are also available to players once the major Deity has been selected

Pick a Starting City: Race determines this to some extent as certain races can only begin in select cities. Also the player can opt to begin in a safe location versus a dangerous one.

The selection of a server can also change the player’s experience as different servers use different rules in controlling character behaviors.
Title: *Final Fantasy VII*

**Genre:** RPG  
**2nd Genre:** None  
**Primary Platform:** PlayStation  
**Other Platforms:** PC  

**Developer:** Square Enix  
**Publisher:** Sony Computer Entertainment America  
**Release Year:** 1997  
**Rating:** T - Teen  
**Rating Descriptor:** Comic Mischief, Mild Animated Violence, Mild Language  

**Scenario:**

What begins as a rebellion against an evil corporation becomes much more. And what erupts goes beyond imagination.

**Characters:**

**Cloud Strife**

- Job: Mercenary (ex-member of SOLDIER)  
- Age: 21  
- Weapon: Sword  
- Height: 5' 7"  
- Birthdate: August 19  
- Birthplace: Nibelheim  
- Blood Type: AB  

The main character of Final Fantasy VII. Originally a member of SOLDIER, he is now a mercenary who will take any job. After being hired by AVALANCHE, he gradually gets caught up in a massive struggle for the life of the planet. His enormous sword can cut almost anything in two.

**Aeris Gainsborough**

- Job: Flower merchant  
- Age: 22  
- Weapon: Rod  
- Height: 5' 3"  
- Birthdate: February 7  
- Birthplace: unknown  
- Bloodtype: O  

Young, beautiful, and somewhat mysterious, Aeris meets Cloud while selling flowers on the streets of Midgar. She decided to join him soon after. Her unusual abilities enable her to use magic, but she seems more interested in the deepening love triangle between herself, Cloud, and Tifa.
Tifa Lockheart

Job: Bar hostess, AVALANCHE member
Age: 20
Weapon: Glove
Height: 5' 4"
Birthdate: May 3
Birthplace: Nibelheim
Blood Type: B

Bright and optimistic, Tifa always cheers up others when they're down. But don't let her looks fool you, she can decimate almost any enemy with her fists. She is one of the main members of AVALANCHE. She and Cloud were childhood friends, and although she has strong feelings for him, she would never admit it.

Barret Wallace

Job: Leader of AVALANCHE
Age: 35
Weapon: Gun-arm
Height: 6' 4"
Birthdate: December 15
Birthplace: Corel Village
Blood Type: O

Head of the underground resistance movement, AVALANCHE, Barret is fighting the mega-conglomerate Shinra, Inc. which has monopolized Mako energy by building special reactors to suck it out of the planet. Barret depends on brute strength and his "Gun-arm" to see him through. His wife died in an accident several years ago, and now he lives with his daughter, Marlene.

Red XIII

Job: Beast
Age: 48
Weapon: Headdress
Height: 3' 9"
Birthdate: Unknown
Birthplace: Cosmo Canyon
Blood Type: Unknown

Just as his name implies, he is an animal with fire-red fur. But under his fierce exterior is an intelligence surpassing that of any human's. His sharp claws and fangs make him good at close-range fighting, but other than that, not much is
known about him. It's not even certain that "Red XIII" is his real name. A real enigma.

**Cid Highwind**

- **Job:** Pilot  
- **Age:** 32  
- **Weapon:** Spear  
- **Height:** 5' 8"  
- **Birthdate:** February 22  
- **Birthplace:** Unknown  
- **Blood Type:** B

Cid is a tough-talking, warm-hearted old pilot who hasn't forgotten his dreams. There's no better pilot by air or sea. He believes someday he'll fly to the ends of the universe. With his handmade spear and knowledge of machinery, he throws himself into any attack regardless of the danger.

**Sephiroth**

- **Job:** Top ranking SOLDIER officer  
- **Age:** Unknown  
- **Weapon:** Long sword  
- **Height:** 6' 1"  
- **Birthdate:** Unknown  
- **Birthplace:** Unknown  
- **Blood Type:** Unknown

Even amongst the elite troops of SOLDIER, Sephiroth is known to be the best. His past is locked away in a confidential file held by Shinra, Inc. His giant sword, which only he can handle, has extremely destructive power. Said to have disappeared in a battle years ago, his current whereabouts are unknown.

**Yuffie Kisaragi**

- **Job:** Materia Hunter, Ninja  
- **Age:** 16  
- **Weapon:** Knife, boomerang, origami (for throwing)  
- **Height:** 5' 2"  
- **Birthdate:** November 20  
- **Birthplace:** Wutai  
- **Blood Type:** A

Although you'd never know it by looking at her, Yuffie comes from a long line of Ninja. She forced herself into the group just to get a 'certain something'.
**Title:** Final Fantasy X

**Genre:** RPG  
**2nd Genre:** None  
**Primary Platform:** PlayStation2  
**Other Platforms:** None

**Developer:** Square Enix  
**Publisher:** Square Enix  
**Release Year:** 2001  
**Rating:** T - Teen  
**Rating Descriptor:** Blood and Violence

**Scenario:**

The world lies on the brink of destruction.

Only a select few may be able to save it.

Final Fantasy X is about a summoner named Yuna and her quest to destroy a mysterious force known as “Sin.” You must guide the main character, Tidus, through the many events of the game. Here we introduce the characters that accompany Yuna along her journey. Note that each character has a unique area of expertise, and can equip different weapons and armor. Review their strengths so you can use them to your advantage on the battlefield.

**Characters:**

**Tidus**

Tidus is a cheerful, rising blitzball star playing for the Zanarkand Abes. He has long hated his father, who was a renowned player himself before his untimely death. Tidus’s quick moves allow him to attack even the swiftest foes with ease.

**Yuna**

Daughter of High Summoner Braska. Honest and determined, Yuna embarks on a pilgrimage to obtain the Final Aeon and defeat Sin. Yuna is learning the mystical art of summoning aeons – powerful spirits of yore.

**Wakka**

Coach and captain of the local blitzball team, the Besaid Aurochs. Wakka plans to retire from the sport after this year’s tournament, so that he can devote himself fully to serving as Yuna’s guardian. His deadly blitzball is especially useful for knocking down aerial enemies.
Lulu

One of Yuna’s guardians. She and Wakka think of Yuna as a younger sister. Lulu’s stoic and self-possessed nature makes her seem insensitive at times. She specializes in the art of black magic, using various dolls to help cast powerful spells.

Kimahri Ronso

A powerful warrior of the Ronso tribe. Kimahri has watched over Yuna from her youngest days. He speaks little, but is deeply devoted to Yuna and serves her loyally as a guardian. Kimahri can learn enemy skills with his Lancet ability.

Auron

The legendary guardian who, together with High Summoner Braska, defeated Sin ten years ago. A man of few words, he guides Yuna and Tidus on their mission to vanquish Sin once more. He swings his gigantic sword with such power that even the toughest fiends are cut asunder.

Rikku

A young Al Bhed girl. Her personality is upbeat and positive, and she is not afraid to speak her mind. She works hard to restore her outcast people to their former glory. Rikku handles mechanical enemies with ease, and can steal items from enemies, too.
**Title:** Final Fantasy X-2  
**Genre:** RPG  
**2nd Genre:** None  
**Primary Platform:** PlayStation2  
**Other Platforms:** None

**Developer:** Square Enix  
**Publisher:** Square Enix  
**Release Year:** 2003  
**Rating:** T - Teen  
**Rating Descriptor:** Suggestive themes, Violence

**Scenario:**

Last time she saved the world. This time it’s personal.

Yuna’s story continues in the first true sequel of the Final Fantasy series.

New dangers threaten Spira. Familiar allies are at hand. And somewhere, somehow, a friend may still be alive… [sic]

Eternal Calm

**Final Fantasy X:** Another story

Two years have passed since Sin was destroyed.

Since defeating Sin and becoming high summoner, Yuna has lived on her childhood home of Besaid Island, and the predictable days pass by one after the other.

Isn’t the simple happiness what she always wanted? Still, Yuna senses something is missing… [sic]

The, one day, her former guardian Rikku comes to Besaid and shows Yuna a movie sphere. The recording is of him.

Or is it? Yuna can’t tell whether it’s him or just someone who looks like him.

“Let’s go look for more clues!” Rikku suggests.

If it is him, Yuna might be able to see him one more time. If not, Yuna will probably never see him again.

No matter what the truth may be, the answers she finds may change things forever. Yuna begins another journey.
The story continues in FINAL FANTASY X-2… [sic]

**Characters:**

**Rikku**

Age 17. Dressphere: Thief

In the two years since she helped Yuna defeat Sin, Rikku has traveled with other Al Bhed around Spira, teaching people all there is to know about machina. During the so-called “search for truth” that overtook Spira after Sin’s defeat, a group of Al Bhed joined the ranks of sphere hunters. With their airship, the Celsius, as a base, Rikku and Brother founded the Gullwings. Rikku invited Yuna to join the Gullwings, and they have been traveling together ever since. As always, Rikku’s endless supply of energy keeps the team on their toes.

**Yuna**

Age 19. Dressphere: Gunner

After defeating Sin, Yuna returned to her home on Besaid. The days passed without incident, but still she sensed something missing in her quiet existence. A movie sphere that Rikku shows her gives her a reason to journey once more.

For now, life as a sphere hunter affords Yuna the chance to live on the wild sided. Old habits die hard, though. Yuna still can’t walk away from people in need.

**Paine**

Age 18. Dressphere: Warrior.

Paine is armed with a one-handed sword and a lukewarm attitude. It seems she joined the Gullwings because of something that happened in her past. However, none of the Gullwings know exactly what that might be. The often ridiculous antics of the Gullwings tend to prompt sarcastic remarks from Paine, but the others don’t seem to worry about it much.

**Nooj**

Age 21

The “meyvn,” or leader of the Youth League. He is a former crusader who, repulsed by the actions of New Yevon, founded the Youth League. He lost his left arm and leg in battle with Sin. Because of the large number of hot-blooded youths in the Youth League, they have a tendency to start trouble.
Baralai

Age 20

The praetor of New Yevon. As their newly elected official, he is deeply respected by the other party members. New Yevon takes a conservative approach, their motto being “One thing at a time.” Even so, their furtive habits – including sphere theft – have earned them a general lack of trust.

Gippal

Age 18

Leader of the Al Bhed Machina Faction. Based in Djose Temple, the group excavates old machine and researches the development of machina weapons.

The Leblanc Syndicate: Logos, Leblanc, and Ormi

A group of sphere hunters who stand as rivals to the Gullwings. They make frequent appearances throughout the story. The Syndicate’s organizational skills are said to be unrivaled in Spira.

The Gullwings: Buddy, Brother, and Shinra

Yuna’s sphere-hunting friends.
Title: *ICO*

Genre: Action RPG  
2nd Genre: Puzzle

Primary Platform: PlayStation2  
Other Platforms: None

Developer: Sony Computer Entertainment America  
Publisher: Sony Computer Entertainment America

Release Year: 2001

Rating: T - Teen

Rating Descriptor: Violence

Scenario:

Solve the puzzles or join the tormented souls forever.

Within a world of enchantment and wonder, evil resides in an ancient castle. Ico, a young boy born with horns, has been expelled from his village and left within this isolated fortress. Embarking on a perilous quest to save himself as well as a beautiful princess, Ico must find a way to escape. However, escaping will be no easy task. Every towering staircase and stone block is a piece of a puzzle. Every open window, dangling chain and razor thin escape illuminates another mystery.

Characters:

Ico's nightmare started the day he drew his first breath. In his village, the birth of a normal child is a source for happiness and relief. Proud fathers show off their new offspring, reassuring themselves and others that this time, the curse has not left its mark. But some births bring suspicion and fear. Once in every generation, the curse arrives with the birth of a special child born with tiny horns jutting from his head.

With word of a cursed birth, fear leaps from person to person like a plague. The whole village settles into a state of quiet, suspicious panic. Any misfortune that befalls the village is blamed on the child with horns. If a crop fails or an illness strikes, he is blamed. Everyone wishes for the day of the sacrifice and the return of good fortune.

For Ico that day was his 12th birthday. When his horns grew large, the villagers knew it was time. The elders would sacrifice him to keep the spirits from harming the village. In the morning, faceless horsemen arrived and took Ico away, riding deep into the forest and beyond. The journey ended at an ancient fortress ruin that stood crumbling against the harsh grey seas.

Inside the fortress, stone crypts stood stacked in the massive fortress hall. A horseman placed Ico into one of the crypts and sealed the terrified boy inside. An eternity of torment would surely follow.
But a twist of destiny granted a short reprieve.

A dream within a nightmare showed Ico a vision of ghostly beauty that drives him to escape. Ico realized that he is not alone and he must free both himself and this lonely prisoner. Indeed his only way out is with the beautiful girl named Yorda.

An ancient Queen rules the castle and her body is beginning to fail. Ico must take Yorda out of the castle before the evil Queen can stop them. He will learn quickly that the shortest distance between two places is a perilous detour. Centuries of disrepair have turned the castle into a death trap and many escape routes are hidden magical portals that must be opened by complex actions. Ico will literally crawl the walls in search of a way out.

Throughout the castle, spirits erupt from the floors to capture the princess and Ico must fight them off. Every twisted towering staircase and stone block of this castle is the piece of a puzzle. Each torch and shaft of light illuminates another mystery. Every open window, dangling chain and razor thin escape is the invitation to one more riddle.
Title: *Neverwinter Nights*  
Genre: RPG  
2nd Genre: Action RPG  
Primary Platform: PC  
Other Platforms: None – scheduled to go mobile in 2004  
Developer: Bioware Corp.  
Publisher: Wizards of the Coast, Inc. (Atari)  
Release Year: 2002  
Rating: T - Teen  
Rating Descriptor: Blood, Violence  

Scenario:  
As the game opens, the once-mighty city of Neverwinter is a hive of panic and terror. Thousands have died from a mysterious plague called the Wailing Death, and thousands more are infected. With the risk of an epidemic spreading across the face of Faerun, the Lords of Neverwinter declared a quarantine and shut the gates to all travel, trapping sick and healthy alike inside the city walls.  

Lady Aribeth de Tylmarande has issued a call to all adventurers within the city, asking them to keep order and help her find a cure. Promises of honor and riches have drawn many to Aribeth’s side, but all for naught. The plague spreads with every passing day, and sweeps through the poorer quarters of the city like a flash fire. Many would-be heroes have fallen, and no cure is in sight.  


Characters:  
Created by the player from following selections:  

Gender: Male or Female  
Race: Human, Dwarf, Elf, Gnome, Half-Elf (1/2 human as well), Half-Orc (1/2 human as well), Halfling  
Class: Barbarians, Bards, Clerics, Druid, Fighter, Monk, Paladin, Ranger, Rogue, Sorcerer, Wizard  
Alignment: Combinations of Good, Neutral, Evil and Chaotic, Neutral, Lawful  
Ability: These are dependant on previous categories as well as increasing scores throughout the game due to player. Choices include: Strength, Dexterity, Constitution, Intelligence, Wisdom, and Charisma
Title: *Nightmare Creatures*

Genre: 3rd Person Action

2nd Genre: Action

Primary Platform: PlayStation

Other Platforms: Nintendo 64, PC, Mobile

Developer: Kalisto Entertainment Technologies

Publisher: Activision, Inc.

Release Year: 1997

Rating: M - Mature

Rating Descriptor: None given on game case

Scenario:

Legend has it that on London’s blackest night in 1834, a secret society known as the Brotherhood of Hecate rediscovered the darkest rituals of a long extinct science and released into the dark, foggy streets of London the most horrifying creatures the world has ever known. The inhabitants of London would certainly have succumbed to this unearthly host but for the strength of two mysterious heroes. On this fateful night, they engaged in a decisive battle to deliver millions from these demon spawn. This is their story…

Characters:

**Father Ignatius Blackward**

A man of God who travels the world combating Evil. He is an expert on foreign languages, cabalistic writings, occult rituals, and shamanism. Ignatius has mastered the lost art of staff fighting which he has reluctantly used in several difficult situations.

**Nadia F.**

A student of the world. She has traveled to many lands with her father, a prominent doctor. She is a biologist by training and has become an expert in the brand new field of immunology, and knows much about microbes, viruses, and their invisible world. She is also a fencer and gymnast and can fight her way out of a tight spot.

**Adam Crowley**

A former legitimate scientist who now masterminds the secret Brotherhood of Hecate. The discoverer of Samuel Pepy’s [sic] mystical diary, Crowley wants to use its formulas to create ‘Supermen’ and rule the world. To this end, Crowley enlists businessmen, bankers, doctors, and others to finance and participate in his mad schemes. So far, their experiments only produce hideous monsters.
Title: *Primal*

Genre: 3rd Person Action  
2nd Genre: Action  
Primary Platform: PlayStation2  
Other Platforms: None

Developer: Sony Computer Entertainment Europe  
Publisher: Sony Computer Entertainment Europe  
Release Year: 2003  
Rating: M - Mature  
Rating Descriptor: Blood, Violence

Scenario:

Civilization is only skin deep.

The battle to save the outside world starts within as Jen Tate - a modern-day girl- faces the demons of an immortal realm and discovers her own supernatural origin.

The Legendary Oblivion

Oblivion - A dimension where energies from four demon realms flow into the Nexus, a vast machine that maintains stability in the eternal conflict between the primal forces of Order and Chaos: Order seeks balance, Chaos strives only for anarchy. Chronos is the guardian, the channeller of powers - but he is weakening, poisoned by the scheming of Abaddon, Lord of Chaos. By rights, no faction should be able to influence events beyond the Nexus, but Abaddon has been planning his treachery for many centuries.

Years ago, Abaddon's servants abducted two babies from the mortal realm - Mortalis - our world. He altered them both so that they would grow into something quite unique: human/demon hybrids, beings caught between worlds, able to break the rules that form the very fabric of Oblivion. But the two babies were saved from Abaddon's clutches by Abdizur, the Champion of Order. He returned them to Mortalis and hid them from Abaddon's sight.

Returning to Oblivion, Abdizur was captured. Imprisoned and tortured, his wisdom and strength have long since been lost. Nevertheless, the babies have remained beyond Abaddon's grasp…

Characters:

Jennifer Tate is pretty ordinary - or so she thinks. Sure, her life has been tough, losing both her parents as a baby and growing up in a string of foster homes. But Jen is a fighter - she knows how to get by. Now twenty-one, she works as a waitress, scraping together money to put herself through college. Jen lives with her boyfriend Lewis, lead singer in an up and coming rock band. It is hard to
believe that it was almost two years ago that fate brought them together, two souls more alike than either can quite comprehend.

Just lately, Lewis has been having really bad nightmares… Dreams that make no sense, dreams that he can't even begin to explain to Jen…

Then one night, as his band nears the end of their set, Lewis spots a huge, staring, misshapen figure. He is unnerved and leaves the stage in a sweat - even Jen is unable to reassure him - something is not right.

As they leave the club, Lewis's nightmares become real… A monstrous creature bellows into the night. Jen is knocked to the ground, hitting her head hard. As she blacks out, her last vision is of her boyfriend, lifted away into the night sky as if he were a rag doll.

As Jen slips in and out of consciousness, images of doctors and nurses standing over her give way to visions of talking stone gargoyles. She sits up, looks down on her still unconscious body. Scree, servant of Arella, goddess of Order, is about to change her life, forever.
**Title:** Suikoden III  
**Genre:** RPG  
**2nd Genre:** None  
**Primary Platform:** PlayStation2  
**Other Platforms:** None

**Developer:** Konami Computer Entertainment Tokyo  
**Publisher:** Konami  
**Release Year:** 2002  
**Rating:** T - Teen  
**Rating Descriptor:** Mild violence and Suggestive themes

**Scenario:**

The Battle for the True Runes is just beginning… [sic]

An unknown force is searching for the True Runes and plans to destroy the world. Three lives from opposing forces in the Grassland War hold the fate of all living things. Can these three discover the secrets of the Flame Champion, find the True Runes and live up to their destiny to forever change history?

The Land and Its Past

Grassland – a region of vast plains and sparse woods, where gales blow strong and nature thrives.

The Six Clans, spread across Grassland, symbolize the wilderness that they inhabit.

To the east lies the mighty Holy Kingdom of Harmonia, and to the south the Republic of Tinto.

Situated to the west beside the sea is the Zexen Federation, a mercantile nation prospering remarkably from recent increases in continental trade.

Military aggression by larger nations toward Grassland has been turned back narrowly time after time.

Confrontation between the Six Clans and the Zexens has especially deep roots. Grassland continues to hang in a dangerous balance between war and peace.

**Characters:**

**Geddoe**

The captain of a small unit in the frontier defense forces of the Holy Kingdom of Harmonia. Geddoe closely watches the hostilities between Grassland and the
Zexen Federation. He must confirm rumors that the Fire Bringer has returned—perhaps to sweep victoriously once again across Grassland and then disappear. If history is to be remade, none shall doubt that this one-eyed man will have something to say about it, even if it means infiltrating Grassland alone.

**Hugo**

A young but skilled rider known to cross the vast prairies of Grassland by steed in the early morning. Hugo is the son of Lucia, Karaya Clan Chief, who assigns him the mission of delivering an official message to the hostile nation of Zexen. As the son of his tribe’s chief, he sets off to help bring peace to a land that has known much grief.

**Chris**

As a parade winds through the Zexen capital of Vinay del Zexay, at the heart of the procession is the illustrious knight named Chris Lightfellow. Atop her white steed, the Silver Maiden receives the cheers of her people. But the Zexen Council gives a new responsibility to this Zexen Knight Captain: to negotiate a peace agreement with the Grassland barbarians of the Six Clans. But is there something she doesn’t know about the treaty?

The game also allows the player to recruit 108 other characters—referred to as the Stars of Destiny—that can join the three main characters in their quest.
Title: *Tomb Raider*

Genre: 3rd Person Action

Primary Platform: PlayStation  

2nd Genre: Action

Other Platforms: PC, N-Gage, Game Boy Color, Sega Saturn

Developer: Core Design, Ltd.

Publisher: Eidos Interactive

Release Year: 1996

Rating: T - Teen

Rating Descriptor: Animated blood, Animated violence

Scenario:

Sometimes a killer body just isn’t enough.

Climb, swim, and backflip your way through a maze of cryptic deathtraps so realistic you can practically smell the decaying flesh. Unload an arsenal of lethal firepower on any wild-dog, giant lizard, or blood-thirsty mercenary that gets in your way.

Your mission is the deadliest one to date – the recovery of the fabled Scion, an incredible treasure reputed to give its possessor vast power. Get ready to cross the globe to take on impossible odds while exploring Incan ruins, Ancient Rome, Egyptian Pyramids, and the Lost City of Atlantis… [Sic]

Characters:

Lara Croft, daughter of Lord Henshingly Croft, was raised to be an aristocrat from birth. After attending finishing school at the age of 21, Lara’s marriage into wealth had seemed assured, but on her way home from a skiing trip her chartered plane had crashed deep in the heart of the Himalayas. The only survivor, Lara learned how to depend on her wits to stay alive in hostile conditions a world away from her sheltered upbringing. 2 weeks later when she walked into the village of Tokakeriby her experiences had had a profound effect on her. Unable to stand the claustrophobic suffocating atmosphere of upper-class British society, she realized that she was only truly alive when she was traveling alone. Over the 8 following years she acquired an intimate knowledge of ancient civilizations across the globe. Her family soon disowned their prodigal daughter, and she turned to writing to fund her trips.

Famed for discovering several ancient sites of profound archeological interest she made a name for herself by publishing travel books and detailed journals of her exploits.
APPENDIX C

ESRB RATING SYMBOLS AND CONTENT DESCRIPTORS
This information is taken directly from the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) website.

The Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) ratings are designed to provide information about video and computer game content, so you can make informed purchase decisions. ESRB ratings have two parts: rating symbols suggest age appropriateness for the game, and content descriptors indicate elements in a game that may have triggered a particular rating and/or may be of interest or concern.

Rating symbols are located on the front of the game box and the content descriptors are located on the back of the game box.

Rating Symbols:

**EARLY CHILDHOOD**

Titles rated EC – Early Childhood have content that may be suitable for ages 3 and older. Contains no material that parents would find inappropriate.

**EVERYONE**

Titles rated E – Everyone have content that may be suitable for persons ages 6 and older. Titles in this category may contain minimal violence, some comic mischief and/or mild language.

**TEEN**

Titles rated T – Teen have content that may be suitable for persons ages 13 and older. May contain violent content, mild or strong language, and/or suggestive themes.

**MATURE**

Titles rated M – Mature have content that may be suitable for persons ages 17 and older. Titles in this category may contain mature sexual themes, more intense violence and/or strong language.

**ADULTS ONLY**

Titles rated AO – Adults Only have content suitable only for adults. Titles in this category may include graphic depictions of sex and/or violence. Adult Only products are not intended for persons under the age of 18.
RATING PENDING
Titles listed as **RP – Rating Pending** have been submitted to the ESRB and are awaiting final rating.

**Content Descriptors:**

- **Alcohol Reference** - Reference to and/or images of alcoholic beverages
- **Animated Blood** - Cartoon or pixilated depictions of blood
- **Blood** - Depictions of blood
- **Blood and Gore** - Depictions of blood or the mutilation of body parts
- **Cartoon Violence** - Violent actions involving cartoon-like characters. May include violence where a character is unharmed after the action has been inflicted
- **Comic Mischief** - Scenes depicting slapstick or gross vulgar humor
- **Crude Humor** - Moderately vulgar antics, including bathroom humor
- **Drug Reference** - Reference to and/or images of illegal drugs
- **Edutainment** - Content of product provides user with specific skills development or reinforcement learning within an entertainment setting. Skill development is an integral part of product
- **Fantasy Violence** - Violent actions of a fantasy nature, involving human or non-human characters in situations easily distinguishable from real life
- **Gambling** - Betting like behavior
- **Informational** - Overall content of product contains data, facts, resource information, reference materials or instructional text
- **Intense Violence** - Graphic and realistic-looking depictions of physical conflict. May involve extreme and/or realistic blood, gore, weapons, and depictions of human injury and death
- **Mature Humor** - Vulgar and/or crude jokes and antics including "bathroom" humor
- **Mature Sexual Themes** - Provocative material, possibly including partial nudity
- **Mild Language** - Mild references to profanity, sexuality, violence, alcohol, or drug use
- **Mild Lyrics** - Mild references to profanity, sexuality, violence, alcohol, or drug use in music
- **Mild Violence** - Mild scenes depicting characters in unsafe and/or violent situations
- **Nudity** - Graphic or prolonged depictions of nudity
- **Partial Nudity** - Brief and mild depictions of nudity
- **Sexual Violence** - Depictions of rape or other sexual acts
- **Some Adult Assistance May Be Needed** - Early Childhood Descriptor only
- **Strong Language** - Profanity and explicit references to sexuality, violence, alcohol, or drug use
• **Strong Lyrics** - Profanity and explicit references to sex, violence, alcohol, or drug use in music
• **Strong Sexual Content** - Graphic depiction of sexual behavior, possibly including nudity
• **Suggestive Themes** - Mild provocative references or materials
• **Tobacco Reference** - Reference to and/or images of tobacco products
• **Use of Drugs** - The consumption or use of illegal drugs
• **Use of Alcohol** - The consumption of alcoholic beverages
• **Use of Tobacco** - The consumption of tobacco products
• **Violence** - Scenes involving aggressive conflict

Additionally, online games that include user-generated content (e.g., chat, maps, skins) carry the notice "**Game Experience May Change During Online Play**" to warn consumers that content created by players of the game has not been rated by the ESRB.
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<http://www.computerandvideogames.com/play/gamingguide/gamingguide.html>


GAMES


1 For these citations, the order of information is as follows: 
Title of the Game. Software Developer. Primary Console that the game was played on. Software Publisher. Publisher Location. US Release Date.


