

PLAY/WRITE



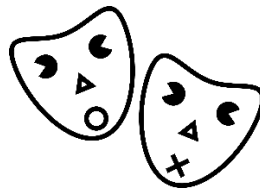
Student Journal Vol. 4



Play/Write Student Journal

Volume IV

February 2024, Klagenfurt



Editorial Team:

Rachel Gorden

Tom Tuček

Samuele Balduzzi

Ylva Schütz

Ellie Chraïbi

Kseniia Harshina

Michele Fanelli

Cover Art: Nikolay Markozov

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Editorial

Rachel Gorden

We hereby present the fourth issue of the *Play/Write Student Journal*, in which we once again showcase works of students in the field of Game Studies. This issue includes eight papers, most of which were written by students and alumni of the Game Studies and Engineering master's program at the University of Klagenfurt. Thematically, all papers (of course) revolve around (video) games, and touch upon various topics, including the (mis)use of games in educational contexts, techniques of storytelling in video games, the incorporation of intersectional thinking in game design, representations and performances of gender across different media, reimaginings of cultural myths and legends in video games, and comparison between film and video games as related media. The perspectives taken on by the authors range from theoretical to critical and practice-oriented. For this issue, Kseniia Harshina, Ellie Chraïbi and Michele Fanelli joined the editorial team. As always, the cover was kindly created by fellow student Nikolay Markozov.

The issue starts with three practice-oriented papers, with two focusing on game design and one on the use of video games in education. In the first paper, “*Meant to be? Developing a Dating Simulator Tackling Issues of Identity*”, Anja Kolundžija documents the development of a dating simulator and how issues of identity were absorbed into her development process.

Similarly, Marie Biedermann’s “*Where is the Intersectionality, FFS? Intersectionality in Video Games and its Cultures*” addresses the lack of intersectional thinking in game design and offers an example of how to incorporate it by presenting her self-developed game *Where is the Bus, FFS?*.

Next, in “*The Battle of Thermopylae – How to Use Assassin’s Creed: Odyssey to Teach Students about Sparta’s Fight Against the Persian Expansion*” Tamara Urach argues for the use of video games in (history) classrooms and shows how they can be incorporated in the example of Ubisoft’s *Assassin’s Creed: Odyssey*.

Taking on a more theoretical perspective, Borna Gredelj discusses in how far the so-called ‘similarity and difference factors’ as developed by Ante Petrić to analyze film can be applied in the analysis of video games in “*Why Can’t We? – Comparing Film and Video Games Using Similarity and Difference Factors.*”

Connecting queer studies and game studies, Kseniia Harshina’s “*In the Ring and On the Runway: Masculinities of Drag and Wrestling from TV to Video Games*” traces the roots, development, and intertwining of drag and wrestling as performative phenomena that challenge

gender categories. She furthermore shows contemporary depictions of the two across different media, including television and video games.

The remaining three papers provide critical analyses of video games, focusing on individual cases. In “Literary and Ludic Mise-en-Abyme in *What Remains of Edith Finch*”, Samuele Balduzzi analyzes how the transmedial technique mise-en-abyme is employed in the video game *What Remains of Edith Finch*, and the reflections this sparks about storytelling across different media.

In “Implicit Messages in the Edutainment Game *The Oregon Trail*,” Ylva Schütz offers a critical analysis of the well-known US-American educational game *The Oregon Trail*. Their analysis reveals implicit biases and messages of the game. Based on this, they criticize the aptness of the game for educational purposes.

Lastly, Tom Tuček analyzes the reimagination of Arthurian legends in Japanese video games, focusing on *Fate/stay night* and *The Legend of Zelda* in “King Arthur as a Romanceable Anime Girl: Depictions of Arthurian Legends in Japanese Video Games”.

Thank you to all of the authors as well as editors and the artist who contributed to this issue! We hope everyone enjoys reading it.

Meant to be? Developing a Dating Simulator Tackling Issues of Identity

Anja Kolundžija

keywords: game development, identity discourse, dating sim, Ren'Py

Introduction

This report documents the concepts and ideas behind the development of the game *Meant to be?* (dzezabel and trinm8 2023), which was made for the class *Mechanics of Identity* at the University of Klagenfurt. It was made with the intention to tackle the discourse about the search for one's identity in a manner different from the usual games one can find about a similar topic.

Usually, the characters who are struggling are young and on the brink of adulthood but in our game, they are elderly people instead. Our reason for doing so will be explained throughout this paper. Because of the nature of the idea we had, we opted for *Ren'Py* as the engine to create our game, which was imagined as a dating simulator.

Story

The game follows the main character, Dad, recently retired and with an identity crisis slowly creeping up on him. With the insistence from his child, Charlie, studying abroad, he reluctantly dives into dating waters with the help of the eponymous app *Meant To Be*.

Dad had a very conservative upbringing, taught to behave “as a man” which made him grow into someone fairly distanced from his feelings, with set beliefs about how a man is expected to behave, what to like and dislike. One of the reasons he never got to develop who he is, was his wife leaving him as soon as Charlie was born. So, he had to put aside his aspirations to instead take care of Charlie, taking on the role of a single parent. Dad did not want his child to go through the hardships he did, so he subconsciously put a lot of pressure on them, e.g., by studying hard to get a good degree and a fulfilling job, which caused a huge strain on the relationship. This is fleshed out gradually throughout the game. Because of the interaction with the dates, Dad comes to realise this and tries to make a change to fix the relationship to his child.

People he dates provide him with various insights into life and identity. Dating comes in two forms, in person and over chatting in the app. Dad would often talk with Charlie and recap what happened. He also has introspective episodes about these dates, through which the player can decide what they want to do next. We envisioned leading the character through the journey of self-discovery; slowly setting himself free from expectations of what he “is supposed to be”, and choosing for himself what he wants.

Mechanics

We decided to have a phone system inside of our game that enables player to chat with their dates as well as with Charlie. The handy thing about this is the option to let the player decide who they want to go on a date with. This way, the player can go through the game in a non-linear way, giving them a more configurational role. They could try and date everyone, or only one person, they would create the story, not follow a specific timeline and order.

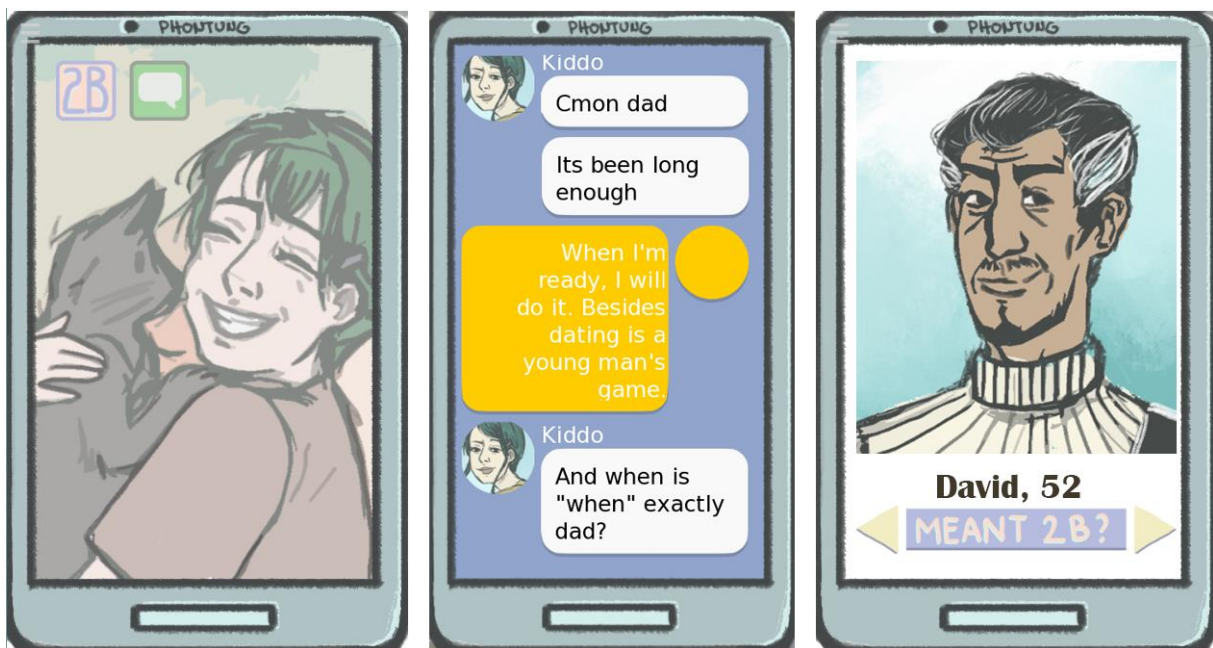


Figure 1 – Phone menus (left to right: home screen with app choices, messaging app chat with Charlie, and Meant 2B app).

These dates are chances for Dad, as well as the player themselves, to have talks about various topics, and to try and challenge their views. In this way, we want to encourage the player to think about what makes these characters the way they are, who Dad is, and by extension, who they are.

Identity Discourse

“People may better understand themselves through interactions with others.”

(Schrier 2019, 11)

Our game focuses on the player’s reflection on their own identity through meaningful talks with the people they go on dates with. The story follows Dad rebuilding his own identity after learning about who others are and how they live.

Even though this game is a dating simulator, the aim we had in mind is not the romance itself, but rather the player character becoming someone who is trying to be the best they can, finding their own path and happiness outside of others. If along the way, they find someone they like, that is good as well. We do not want to make a player feel pressured to choose from the available characters though. Lack of choice was one of the key reasons why romance games felt unsatisfying to the respondents of a study survey conducted by Heidi McDonald (see McDonald 2015). Players should have a choice, and not choosing anyone is a choice as well.

As Leighton Gray, co-writer of *Dream Daddy* (Game Grumps, 2017), said: “Never ever market your game on the inclusivity, don’t do it. It is the bare minimum, not a thing you should get cookies for. (...) Do it because it’s the right thing to do, and it’s good storytelling” (Gray 2019, 55:58). This is what we aimed to avoid. Characters should be unique in total, not just because of only one aspect of their identity, such as gender, sexual orientation, their job, or anything else.

The player cannot (initially) choose the gender of their player character so as to let them play as someone constrained by many rules and expectations set since they were born. As the story progresses, it would be possible to let them choose as they learn more about themselves. This way, the player can identify with Dad not only over parts of the identity they could share, but also the hardships that come along with the process of establishing themselves as a person.

The three people Dad can go on dates with are Taman, Bigby (Bill), and David. All of them challenge Dad’s (and maybe the player’s) views on life and themselves in their own way.

The first datable character, Bigby, is a highly successful person with a passion for his job and who has no family; but that is not portrayed as something missing in his life. As a complete opposite of Dad, he provides Dad with a different perspective on the family-work relationship.

David is the character with whom Dad feels the first spark of potential romantic feelings and thus makes Dad question and explore his sexuality as they date. It does not necessarily need to lead to dad changing what he feels, but rather become aware of possibilities. To Dad, David's life might mean the same as Sam from *Gone Home* (The Fullbright Company, 2013) meant for Merritt K, formerly Merritt Kopas (see Ruberg and Shaw 2017, 145-149). It could be understood as a reason to hope rather than grieve about past experiences, to see that he should not be afraid of feeling the way he might, and to provide his child with a safe space so as to not have to go through the same things.

Taman, the third datable character, gets Dad to open up by sharing stories about their loved ones and the struggle of growing up in an unaccepting conservative environment. Their talks on dates present a chance for Dad and the player to begin questioning their gender performance (see Butler 2008) and to become more aware of how much heteronormativity played into their view of themselves, other people, and their relationships until that point.

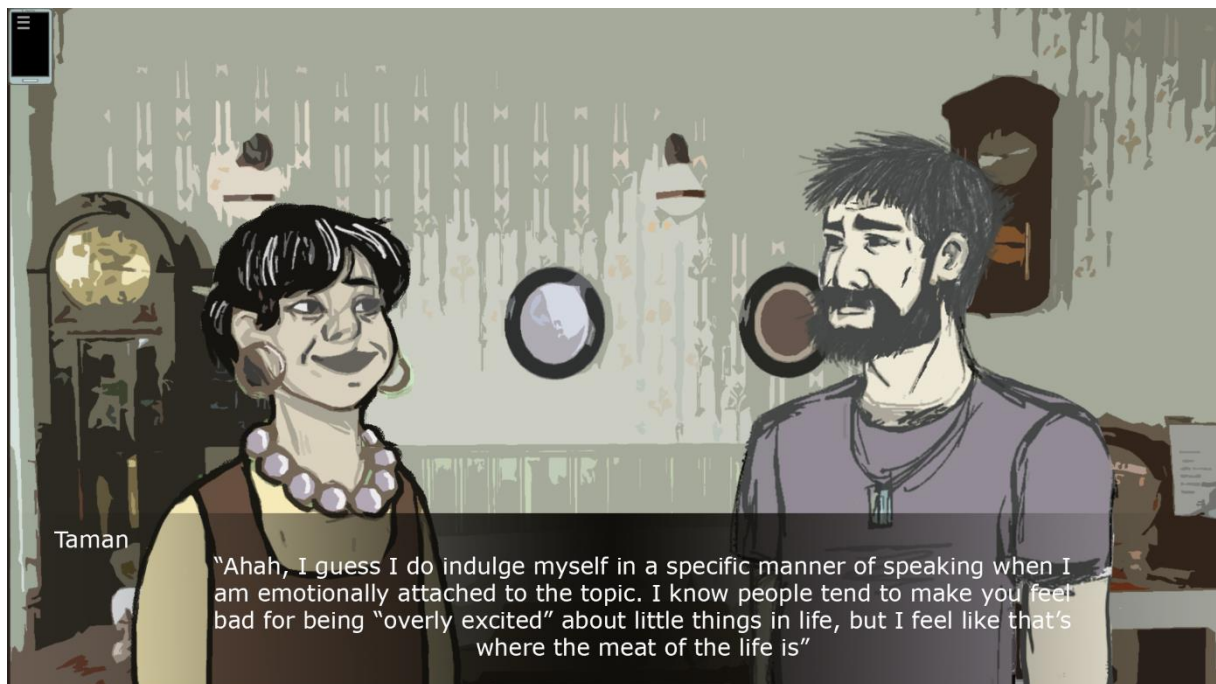


Figure 2 – Date scene of Dad with Taman.

Dating simulators are often of a pretty similar concept, where the player can try to romance one of many different love interests, who are almost always player-oriented, which means no matter the gender and orientation of the player character, the NPC are going to be interested in them. The player chooses what they want to say and do, and depending on their choices, they wind up with one of the characters in the end.

This is surely not the case in real life, so we wanted our game to feature a character that isn't available to actually date. That is Taman, a character Dad can get close to, but never

actually engage with romantically. We will not always be interested in the person interested in us, and vice-versa, and it was important for us to get that idea across.

Conclusion and Reflection

I believe that the identity of a character should be inseparable from them as an idea, not an addition. I wanted our characters to be specific in the way they are as a whole, and not to be defined by their gender or beliefs only. But the more I thought about how to approach this topic and not make it seem that way, the more confusing it got. “Am I thinking too shallow? Will I hurt someone unintentionally?” Thoughts like these were constantly on my mind.

So, I just started creating characters that I felt were relatable and as real as possible. Characters that I would enjoy talking to over coffee and whose ideas and beliefs would make me think and reconsider my views on things. This is where Dad came from and where the people he would meet also emerged. Characters all came to be from our genuine views of the struggles people encounter on their journey to self-discovery, striving not only to define who they are to themselves but also to convey that identity to others.

Working on this project helped me think a bit differently about the characters I am reading, watching, or creating, what makes them feel genuine and liked, and what part of them compels me to follow their stories and helps me reflect better on who I was as a person.

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Where is the Intersectionality, FFS? Intersectionality in Video Games and their Culture

Marie Biedermann

keywords: intersectionality, game design, identity, video game cultures

Introduction

”[W]here there’s no name for a problem, you can’t see a problem”
(Crenshaw 2016).

Video games have come a long way. From virtual post-apocalyptic worlds to life-like simulations and MMORPGs. However, today’s games admittedly do not feature a lot of intersectional thinking. The narrative exploration of different perspectives of marginalized people has largely been ignored by the minds of triple-A game development, or better said their funders.

Therefore, indie-game development and its chance to pursue directions of creativity and importance has become more meaningful. Intersectionality can be something creative and important. Hence, I created *Where is the Bus, FFS?* (Vulvarine 2023); a game that explores marginalized groups and their different struggles to reach the same goal (in this case, the bus-station). *Where is the Bus, FFS?* is a 2D, top-down prototype that was developed during a two-day game jam to demonstrate how intersectionality can be incorporated into game design in order to familiarize an audience with the topic in a simplified manner.

In this paper, I will demonstrate that video games can be used as a tool to create empathy within its players in regards to different identities using Kimberlé Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality, and my self-developed video game *Where is the Bus, FFS?*.

Where is the Bus, FFS?

Before diving into the analysis of intersectionality in *Where is the Bus, FFS?*, I will give a brief summary of the game:

The first player-character is a white cis-man. After a short beginning sequence, the player jumps into a well. Then the game begins in a small and sketchy place with parking spots and run-down buildings. It rains, it is dark and the atmosphere is tense. The player learns the objective of the game: to find the bus-station in order to get home. The player experiences

the story in the body of a white cis-man. This protagonist receives advantages and suffers disadvantages due to his identity. After completing the game as the first character, the player dives into the story once more, but this time they embody a white cis-woman. Again, the player experiences advantages and disadvantages due to her identity. The next protagonist is a black cis-woman and the very last a black cis-man in a wheelchair. I decided to not use transgendered characters because the portrayal would need to be obvious and this can be challenging in a pixel graphic style due to the size of the sprites.

According to their identity, they are hindered or advantaged in one way or another and must play according to their own set of rules to reach the objective. The white cis-man will not be able to speak to any female character in the game. The night is a scary place for women, and therefore, women will perceive the man as dangerous. However, male NPCs (Non-Playable-Characters) will help them out. The white cis-woman will have difficulties talking to men due to them objectifying her while not considering her problems of importance. The black cis-woman will face problems in communication with both white men and white women, but will receive help from people of color. The black cis-man in the wheelchair will, apart from having hardships with communicating with everyone involved, not be able to manage any path the former characters were able to use due to the place being inaccessible for wheelchair users. Therefore, this player-character must find a more accessible path to reach the objective.

Intersectionality

The term intersectionality was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, an American lawyer/jurist specializing in anti-discrimination law. “Many years ago, I began to use the term ‘intersectionality’ to deal with the fact that many of our social justice problems like racism and sexism are often overlapping, creating multiple levels of social injustice” (Crenshaw 2016). She describes the complex problems of overlapping marginalized identities and argues that the concentration of individual discriminatory issues excludes people who suffer from more than one of those issues (Crenshaw 2016).

According to her, discussions focusing on racism and sexism exist separately. However, the combination of both is often overlooked. A person who suffers from racist and sexist conditions in society has different experiences than a person who belongs to only one marginalized group. Crenshaw tried to find a term for this because „when there’s no name for a problem, you can’t see a problem” (Crenshaw 2016). She describes this process shortly: „So

what do you call being impacted by multiple forces and then abandoned to fend for yourself? Intersectionality seemed to do it for me” (Crenshaw 2016).

Video Games, their Culture, and Intersectionality

In 2019, Sal Humphreys published an article in *Games and Culture* titled “On Being a Feminist in Game Studies”. She describes her struggles as a Game Studies scholar working in the field of video games and how the marginalization of the medium leads to its problematic culture:

It is this very position on the edge—of the mainstream media, but also of serious/not serious—that is used as a rhetorical tool of some of the worst outbreaks of misogyny and hate speech we have seen in recent times. These campaigns have serious effects on individuals’ lives, and legitimize a culture of disrespect for women, people of color, LGBTQ people. (Humphreys 2019, n.p.)

She argues that due to video games not being part of mainstream culture, misogyny displayed in them and further problematic aspects may be excused as jokes. The discriminatory and excluding culture surrounding video games and the medium itself is not treated as serious, as the medium itself has not reached mainstream status yet. It is the “constant struggle for legitimacy” (Humphreys 2019, n.p.) that excuses behaviors which usually would be judged more harshly.

However, as this article was written in 2019, the stance of video games and its frame in mainstream culture might have changed. Unfortunately, problematic behavior in video games, their development teams and their fan-bases still exists. *Gamer-gate*, the main event mentioned by Humphreys, was not the end of exclusionary behavior. Events like this range from outrage of fans about *Horizon Forbidden West* (Guerilla Games 2022) due to its main character looking too masculine (Warren 2021), to actual suicide of video game developers due to their hostile and unsafe work environment (Orland 2022). Even nowadays, gender-neutral pronouns in Bethesda’s new game *Starfield* (Bethesda Game Studios 2023) caused an outrage in video game enthusiasts and motivated those to violently make their opinions heard online (von Oppen 2023).

However, in 2011 Bogost already explored the development of the *gamer* identity:

If videogame playership is indeed broadening, then videogames will no longer fall under the sole purview of the games industry. [...] Instead, there will be many smaller groups, communities, and individuals with a wide variety of interests, some of them occasionally intersecting with particular videogame titles. (153-154)

If Bogost’s assumption is legitimate, there is hope for mainstream video game culture. According to his theory, the term *gamer*, and therefore, the marginalization of video games will vanish due to the medium becoming a very integrated part in society’s everyday life. Moreover, he

states that people will not play a video game per se, but will use digital games so regularly that the medium itself will become unnoticeable (Bogost 2011). The first hint of this development is the *gamification* of various aspects of our lives, may it be dating or online shopping.

However, as the medium of video games has not reached its full transformation into the mainstream yet, the inclusion of intersectionality in video game development, as well as their narratives can be considered beneficial for all participants. Humphrey's experience with fan-bases and colleagues would develop into something more nourishing than draining. In "The Need for Intersectional Perspective and Inclusive Designs in Gaming" Kafai, Richard and Tynes argue for the need for intersectionality in video games, as well as their industry:

With children, adolescents and adults getting much of their knowledge about race, gender and sexuality from games, more work is needed to document these experiences and reflect upon how they can broaden perspectives on others rather than reducing them to a single attribute advancing game play. (2016, 7)

This quote specifically refers to the very popular *Grand Theft Auto* series (Rockstar and Digital Eclipse 1997-2013), in which the player is invited to experience the life of a black man who is involved in various criminal activities. The authors argue that the game has been "engineered around racial stereotypes of urban life" (7), and therefore perpetuates a specific worldview within its players, especially young adults, children and adolescents. Furthermore, they argue that in order to broaden or even create an intersectional perspective in video games, the design process must be aware of a "game's inherent values (...) within the earliest decisions of a game's development" (8).

Intersectionality in "Where is the Bus, FFS?"

After this brief introduction to intersectionality and its importance in the video game industry and culture, I will now discuss how intersectionality is incorporated into the game *Where is the Bus, FFS?*.

As already mentioned above, in order to fully finish the game and understand its message, the player must play through the story four separate times. First as a white man, then as a white woman, as a black woman and lastly as a black man in a wheelchair. The idea was to create a small, accessible game (free on itch.io) to give players an idea of the very different hardships various identities, especially intersectional ones, have to face.

Each protagonist faces different challenges, however, the goal remains the same - to find the bus. The challenges make each play-through a different experience as the environment, dialogue options and accessible places change. For instance, in the second play-through, the player is able to access an area, which the protagonist before could not. The white woman is

able to access it due to the help of a white female NPC in the game. In-game the NPCs which resemble the protagonist through skin color and/or gender will become an advantage or disadvantage for the protagonist. The changing identities of the player are supposed to demonstrate the advantages or disadvantages marginalized and non-marginalized groups face.

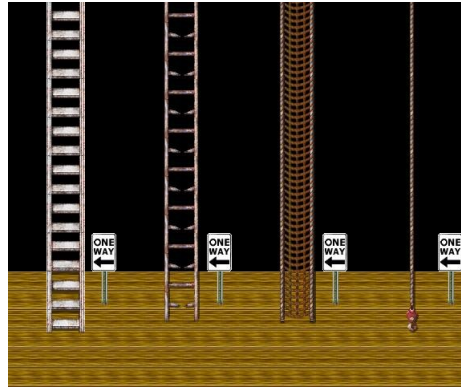


Figure 1 - Screenshot of the end-scene in the game.

The most varying and longest run of the game is the very last one. The idea is to show that city architecture struggles to reinforce barrier-free infrastructure. Much like Crenshaw argued: it is the visibility which is needed to create improvement. The disabled person is not capable of navigating through the same pathways the former protagonists were, and therefore, has to uncover a new way to reach his goal. To resolve the issue of the wheelchair protagonist, I developed a new map with the sole purpose of providing a draining and annoying experience. A long, lonely street, many colliding objects, and icy conditions make the wheelchair harder to navigate in terms of speed.

The end of *Where is the Bus, FFS?* is supposed to give a very clear idea of the different struggles each protagonist faces. Figure 1 shows a black room in which each protagonist is made to climb up. However, each individual is given a different path to climb. An animation demonstrates how far each is capable of climbing. Positioned from left to the right are the white man, white woman, the woman of color and the black person in the wheelchair. The white man climbs rather easily; the white woman shows troubles due to the broken ladder; the woman of color has major difficulties and becomes stuck; all while the person with the disability was not able to move one bit. The ladder demonstrates metaphorically the unbalanced advantages people with different identities face in Western societies.

However, it has to be mentioned that this paper and the game it presents come with limitations. “[A] feminist approach pays attention to the nuances of different kinds of users,

different contexts, and understandings generated from different participants in this system” (Humphreys 2019, n.p.). In order to acquire a feminist approach, according to Humphreys, one has to pay attention to their users, contexts and generated understandings. As I am a white woman living in a Western country with predominantly white population, I can only try to make my very simplified intersectional game experience a true one. However, if this game were a greater project, well financed, and aimed to be published via various platforms, I would suggest to draw attention to research of women of color, LGBTQIA+ people, people with disabilities and every marginalized group present in Western societies.

Conclusion

This essay has shown that intersectionality is an important part of video games themselves and their surrounding culture. However, for change to become reality one has to start small, and to start small, I created a small intersectional video game. With *Where is the Bus, FFS?*, I tried to bring attention to the struggles various identities and especially intersectional ones are forced to face. It is in particular this attention that is needed in order to create visibility where there was none, beforehand.

Just like Kimberlé Crenshaw said: “[W]here there’s no name for a problem, you can’t see a problem” (Crenshaw 2016), and this problem’s name became “Where is the Bus, FFS?”.

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The Battle of Thermopylae – How to Use *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* to Teach Students about Sparta's Fight Against the Persian Expansion

Tamara Urach

keywords: educational games, history, historiographical thinking, Sparta, *Assassin's Creed*, digital natives

The ancient Greek world is a mythical place and stories of various heroes and battles have had a great potential to fuel the imagination of individuals ever since, which is largely due to accounts passed down by ancient Greek historians like Herodotus (Columbia College n.d.). The ancient Greek world has thus been used in various different contexts, among which we can also count *Assassin's Creed's* 11th major instalment called *Odyssey* (Ubisoft Quebec 2018), which explores the 'Golden Age' of Greece, allowing the player to experience both Sparta and Athens in its full glory. One of the most important battles throughout the Greco-Persian wars, the Battle of Thermopylae, features in the main game and allows the player to defend the Spartans' battleground against the Persians with King Leonidas in the intro. In addition to that, the fight can also be explored in the course of the discovery mode that allows players, non-gamers, teachers, and students to roam Ancient Greece. Due to a generational shift among students and technological advance, the modern learner is a 'Digital Native', a term that was coined by Marc Prensky in 2001 (as opposed to the term 'Digital Immigrant', referring to people that did not grow up with modern technology). Today, as much as in 2001, one native language of students is thus the digital one, making video games a great and 'natural' tool for them to use while learning (Schallegger 2015, 367; Prensky 2001, 1).

There are several advantages and educational benefits of using *Assassin's Creed*, or video games in general, in an educational context. Arguably, one of the biggest advantages of learning and teaching with video games is their motivational effect and appeal (Rüth 2021, 3). Studies have shown not only that 96% of students enjoy playing *Assassin's Creed* to different degrees (Karsenti 2020, 34), but also that their performance increased with video game instruction compared to the traditional teaching methods (Rüth 2021, 3). Some further important potential advantages are that video games offer continuous assessment as well as guidance and a more collaborative, engaging classroom experience. They are, unlike movies and books,

interactive in nature and can thus hook children and give them a brain break from traditional learning. Since players follow rules within a video game to achieve certain goals, they receive immediate feedback in terms of outcome. Finally, video games provide experience with motivational, social, and cognitive approaches to learning as well as so-called 21st century skills by taking a self-directed approach (Rüth 2021, 2, 7; Nguyen 2021).

However, teaching history with *Assassin's Creed* also poses different problems. The most problematic aspect is the availability of video games, or rather technological infrastructure itself, in classrooms and schools. Additional factors that might keep teachers from using video games in educational contexts are a lack of competence among both students and teachers, games not fitting the lesson plan or even being constrained by curricula as it might be challenging to find fitting video games that go hand in hand with what is supposed to be taught. Finally, the financial outlay is not to be underestimated (Rüth 2021, 3, 7; Karsenti and Parent 2020, 29).

Looking at video games in history classes in particular, one has to note that most historical games are designed to entertain rather than educate, which is also the case for the *Assassin's Creed* series. The series consists of commercial games which are set in historical environments and periods, featuring authentic characters and architecture. One problematic aspect is that historical games simulate the past rather than representing it, so in order for it to be used as a tool for teaching, content needs to be extracted and reflected upon. It is important to see historical video games as a set of materials used in class with instructions and guidance by the teacher, scientific sources, and opportunities to debrief the experience (McCall 2016, 518-527; Karsenti and Parent 2020, 30-32). History class is, after all, supposed to teach not only history, but also historiographical thinking, i.e. reflecting on a number of different sources, which can also include novels, TV programmes, and video games. Furthermore, video games also enable students to experience a historical period within a simulation with the help of storylines, information, as well as capsules (Karsenti and Parent 2020, 31). With the help of the engagement video games have to offer (Schallegger 2015, 367), teaching historical topics like, in this case, the Greco-Persian wars can be framed in a more engaging way.

One of the most legendary battles throughout the Greco-Persian wars¹ was the last stand of the Spartan king Leonidas and his allies at the mountain pass Thermopylae in 480 BCE. After expanding their empire into mainland Europe in the years before the battle and advancing

¹ According to the Austrian curriculum, Greek-Roman history, including the Greco-Persian wars, is supposed to be taught in fifth grade (RIS 2023, 200).

into central Greece, the local forces took a last stand against the Persian intruders (Cartwright 2013). At Thermopylae the Greeks, led by the Spartan king Leonidas, gained an advantage over the Persians due to the narrowness of the pass, which hindered the Persian forces from unfolding their massive advantage and potential. The Greek army consisted of a few thousand men: Peloponnesian warriors (300 of which were from Sparta), Thespians, warriors from Phocis and Locris, as well as Thebans (Bengtson 1950, 156-157). The number of Persian warriors, on the other hand, is believed to be ranging from 70,000 to 300,000 men (Lohnes and Sommerville 2023). After arriving at Thermopylae in the summer of 480 BCE and waiting for five days, the Persians attacked the Greeks, but were unsuccessful in doing so for two days (Bengtson 1950, 157), even 10,000 ‘immortals’, highly skilled elite warriors from Persia, failed to overcome the Greek forces and were mostly killed in action. Ultimately, it was a local man from Malis who brought a mountain path to the Persians’ attention, offering them a way to circumvent the Greek troops and thus leading them behind the Greek lines. King Leonidas and 1,000 soldiers from Sparta and Thespieae held their position at the pass and covered the retreat of the rest of the Greek troops, fighting the Persians to the death. Subsequently, a memorial in the form of a lion was erected to honour Leonidas and his warriors (Günther 2008, 122). The Persians’ goal of getting access to central Greece was thus achieved and they continued with their campaign, destroying city after city (Bengtson 1950, 158) and expanding their empire further south (Lohnes and Sommerville 2023).

The fight between Spartans and Persians is part of *Assassin’s Creed: Odyssey’s* intro and serves as tutorial phase. After starting the game, the player is first introduced to Leonidas, who is standing at the cliffs of Thermopylae, overlooking the Persian fleet and preparing his fellow warriors for the battle ahead. After an initial boss-fight against the Persian warrior Kurush, the player, assuming the avatar of King Leonidas is presented with the Malisian traitor by a Spartan light soldier (TheRadBrad 2018):

Spartan Soldier:	We are betrayed, my king. Xerxes knows of the path behind the mountain. They are coming.
Persian Soldier:	[laughs] By dawn you’ll be completely surrounded!
Leonidas:	We are Spartans, when are we not.
Persian soldier:	Spartans! [spits] That word will mean nothing when Xerxes wipes your bloodline from the face of th—[killed by Leonidas]
Leonidas:	Today was a day the Persians will never forget. Tomorrow is a day the world will remember (TheRadBrad 2018, 7:22-8:25)

At a later point in the game, the battle is mentioned again, and the defeat of the Spartans by the Persians is shown. King Leonidas is heavily wounded by multiple arrows and ultimately

killed by a Persian soldier; however, he also manages to stab his killer with his broken spear before succumbing to his wounds (Zanar Aesthetics 2018, 6:02-8:17). The spear is an important item within the game as it is the one the game's protagonist, mercenary Cassandra and fictional granddaughter of Leonidas, carries.

Another interesting educational feature that deals with the battle of Thermopylae is the game's discovery mode. Not only can a teacher choose to show scenes from or play through the episodes mentioned above, but they can also use the game's discovery mode in an educational context in addition to the game itself. All in all, *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey's* discovery mode offers thirty different tours around and about famous cities, daily life, battles and wars, politics and philosophy, as well as ancient Greek art, religion, and myths (Ubisoft North America 2019b, 0:59-1:13). One of those tours gives the player an understanding of what happened during the Battle of Thermopylae, letting them discover the historical site in eight tour stations. Players/students are ultimately told about the course of events during the battle in an informative and entertaining way as they are walked through and informed about the historical events on-site by King Leonidas himself, offering a different experience than (the usual) teacher-centred teaching. The tour spans the events starting with the aftermath of Darius' defeat at Marathon and Xerxes' vengeance against the Greeks to Leonidas' death and ending with the subsequent Greek win at the Battle of Plataia in 479 BCE (Ubisoft North America 2019a).

Although the materials offered by the game might be looking back and reappraising the past, they need to be thoroughly conferred on with students. Games and play are and have always been essential as they develop social and cognitive skills, promoting learning as part of them (Karsenti and Parent 2020, 29). Presenting students with various interesting and engaging sources which they could then compare and contrast with each other in terms of quality is essential to boost their historiographical thinking. Just like films and novels, video games or, in this case, *Assassin's Creed* can be a great tool to assist learning in an educational context. After all, film is a medium that has often been used as a secondary source in history classes (Karsenti and Parent 2020, 31). It is thus important to debrief and discuss both the video game as well as the discovery mode with young learners and to what degree both parts of the game are (un)realistic or historically (in)accurate. The game (series) needs the teacher to act as a guide for the students for them to learn to think critically and historically, pointing them in the right direction and help them assess the quality of the game as a secondary source (Karsenti and Parent 2020, 32). Since quizzes like Kahoot improved student's attitude toward learning and improved their scores (Nguyen 2021), the quiz about the Greco-Persian wars, which is

included as part of the discovery tour in the game, might be especially helpful for a classroom environment. In addition to that, the tour also includes pictures and audio descriptions (or transcriptions) of historical finds that are relevant (Ubisoft North America 2019a).

In conclusion, it can be said that *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* can be used in a classroom environment in mainly two different ways. Showing certain scenes from the games that deal with historical topics, in this case the Battle of Thermopylae, might spark students' interest and can be used for exactly that purpose. Yet, it can be especially useful to work with the game's discovery mode and let young learners walk through the (virtual) scene on which the battle took place. Not only was the discovery mode specifically created for that purpose, but it also includes special features like historical finds and a quiz to test the student's knowledge. Due to young learners being 'Digital Natives' today, video games, and thus also *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey*, are a medium that students feel more comfortable and likely to engage with (Schallegger 2015, 367), which can be used to the teacher's advantage. Since there are different instalments of Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed* offering discovery modes, others might be used and explored in an educational context such as *Assassin's Creed: Origins* (2017) for ancient Egypt, or *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla* (2020) for medieval England.

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Why Can't We? – Comparing Film and Video Games Using Similarity and Difference Factors

Borna Gredelj

keywords: film theory, Ante Petrić, video game analysis

Introduction

Ever since the dawn of the first cinematic cutscenes in video games (some would even argue first visuals), such as: *Bugaboo (The Flea)* (Paco&Paco 1983) or *Karateka* (Mencher 1984) they have been compared to films, having filmic elements and other factors that point out how video games have learned a lot from the already established Seventh Art (Canudo 1923). This essay does not aim to prove either point, but would rather try to show whether the similarity and difference factors, theorized by Ante Petrić in his book *Osnove Teorije Filma* (2001), freely translated *The Basics of Film Theory*, could apply to video games.

What are the Similarity and Difference Factors?

In the opening chapters of his magnum opus, *Osnove Teorije Filma*, Petrić defines what makes film, i.e. cinematography close to our own perceived reality or, on the other hand, makes it different. He compiled his reasons into *čimbenici sličnosti i razlike* (similarity and difference factors), which will be the base of comparison for this text.

Similarity Factors

1) Film Hears and Sees Instead of Us – Petrić argues that film is so similar to our own reality that it enables us to understand every single part of its visual and auditory presentation: “The result of this optic-chemical transmission can be seen as a compact vision of physical reality” (2001, 18, my translation) – when we see a sweeping shot of a street we will recognize it has depth (something we will touch upon later) and when we hear music we are likely to imagine the instrument it is coming from and feel emotions invoked with different chords.

I would argue that this factor applies to video games as well – it is the bare minimum of player understanding. When we are thrown into a level, we immediately recognize its visual representation, its design, the corridors laying in front of us and the forms of enemies waiting

for us. Even if the form is something alien to humans, our knowledge of our world fills in these blanks. For example, bosses in *Bloodborne* (FromSoftware 2015), a game of eldritch monsters and beasts, can hardly be classified as humans but we still classify parts of their bodies as ‘limbs’ or ‘tendrils’ – so things we recognize from our own reality.

2) Alternation of Light and Darkness – this factor boils down to the physiology of perception, the way the human eye sees and understands objects around it. This is the basis of perception for the medium: the density of light, movement and transformations of the form; “At the end, illusion of seen reality is specially intensified with displays of living and inanimate objects in the state of transformation, of movement.” (Petrlić 2001, 25, my translation)

When it comes to video games, there is no doubt that this factor holds power. Visuals are our way of understanding and navigating the world, recognizing movement and location of a certain body. Video games, though, start from a different point. While the camera records the reality in front of it (the same reality we view with our visual apparatus), video games need to create this reality via engine, a virtual space that resembles our own. “Game designers don't simply tell stories; they design worlds and sculpt spaces” (Jenkins 2004, n.p.).

3) Attributes of Time –

Duration (which can be the same as the real world equivalent), course of time (relation before-after, because some events not only cause others but come before them) and chronology (relation of now-past and future, because the flow of events always reminds us of prior happenings). (Petrlić 2001, 25, my translation)

All factors that come together to create a unique whole are called the attributes of time. Film, as a medium, is finite and limited in its runtime.

Games differ wildly in this regard. While the story of a game certainly has a duration, a finite timeline until the player hits the credits, a lot of games are not played in one sitting nor does the game incentivize us to do so but rather to play it in multiple sessions, where each has its own duration. Also, where film directs the viewer’s attention in any direction “the director” wants, pacing itself to show our heroes grow and save the day, a player could find themselves stuck on a part of a game’s level, lengthening the whole ordeal. If the player never passes a level, what then? Does their story stop here? - the time in a video game is also defined by the speed of the player.

4) Music and Sound – as was the case with visuality in cinema, when hearing music and sounds during scenes we note their depth, movement and pitch. This also helps us understand scenes

and sequences, because music leads the viewer, describing the happenings in the scene and the dynamics between characters and ordeals.

When it comes to games, they can use this approach while also having something special: adaptive music, which changes and fluctuates as the player plays. To illustrate this point, I would like to point out the adaptive system of *DOOM* (ID Software 2016) – player actions in quick succession (movement, killing enemies) are emphasized with the soundtrack getting faster and more aggressive. This could, of course, be compared to action scenes in movies, where the protagonist is dominating his opposition.

5) Autonomy of Film – “Observation independent of the act of filming” (Petrlić 2001, 26, my translation). Things in reality the camera cannot control or, as Petrlić puts it “resist the act of filming” (26). These are, in documentaries for example, passersby that cover their faces when they notice they are being filmed or a cloud that suddenly covers the sun and forces the filming to stop and wait for it to clear.

This is a factor which games could never reproduce because they are predetermined (programmed). Each time we step into a room or walk over a bridge, everything that happens is already set and waiting to spring into motion. Some could argue the existence of randomness, but that factor is established between preset templates. While cinema captures the chaotic nature of our world, video games create a “controlled chaos” (i.e. the way particles fly when two swords clash), a mimic which tries to evoke this spirit of this “chaos”, which is never a bad thing: a more controlled environment is free of stressful and chaotic happenings (an NPC will never stop doing their predetermined tasks and do something which the designers and programmers have not already determined).

6) The Appearance of Unique Creatures - “(...) all displayed creatures do not appear as ‘representatives’ of their species. They are filled with individualities, everything in cinema appears as an individual” (Petrlić 2001, 26, my translation). Note that this does not refer to CGI, but reality.

Another factor which games simply cannot reproduce just because of simple reasons such as budget and visual clarity. Let’s take an enemy from *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard 2004), for example, a simple goblin. Even though he may have slightly different armor, he is identical, both in code and in visuals, to a thousand other goblins which will spawn after him. And all those thousand goblins are basically simple variations pulling from a few presets, meaning the finer details are lost (e.g., one has a nose slightly crooked, two centimeters to the left) This

can be considered a blessing, rather than a curse, because the player will recognize different things, not needing to stop and adjust upon seeing them. With the advancement of procedural generation, this could be circumvented but then again: creatures would lose their dominant features and the player would have to stop and realize what they are (which could hamper their ability to react quickly).

Difference Factors – The Metamorphosis of the Filmed World

1) 3D Space Perceived as 2D – film employ a synthesis between the two, but the reason we understand depth in films is simply our own visual learning through life. Cinema ‘fakes’ the appearance of 3D, the same way an artist paints a house in the distance, by making it appear smaller according to perspective laws. Games also follow this factor, because it mimics what is already known to us.

2) Reduction of Depth – as mentioned in the previous factor, film cameras cannot perceive depth. For the camera, a ball bouncing into the distance means it is getting smaller, rather than it being farther away. One other detail Petrić argues is the so-called concealment of perspective: “Order and relationship of objects in a certain space depends on our will, more correctly, we create it: moving our eyes, head and whole body we always achieve a new perspective” (Petrić 2001, 28, my translation).

Video games exemplify this detail to a great degree: as players always have control, they can view space and objects from almost any angle they desire. Some games have even created gameplay loops around such ideas: *Superliminal* (Pillow Castle 2019), where players solve puzzles using differing perspectives.

3) The Framework of a Film is the Canvas – the world of cinema exists within a frame, a defined border where its reality ends and our own begins. Of course, human vision is not as limited as a cinema screen - as it has no defined “beginning” and or “end”, and we also have to take into account focus and blur. Also, film has two dimensions: the visible (what we see happening on screen) and the invisible (what is happening offscreen).

This factor is now brought into question because of the appearance of VR and AR games, which question where our own perception begins and ends. They enable the existence of a different world for the game, one which tries to immerse the player by simulating its own. In other cases, the frame is used instrumentally – its corners are spaces for information, such as health or ammo, maps and other UI elements.

When it comes to dimensions of visibility, it is mostly decided by player movement or direction of the camera (visible if the player is looking at an object, invisible if the player is not).

4) Audiovisual Absence – film recognizes only two sensations: sight and sound. Even though there have been experiments which involved other senses such as 4D, they won't be the focus of this analysis.

Games share this exploration of the senses. Even though VR and AR bring us a step closer, they are still only perceived visually and by sound. It is only a matter of time before these technologies advance and bring an open new possibilities of play, including more human senses.

5) Black and White – “A movie doesn't have to be in color, it can be black and white or in some other chromatic technique which widely differs from the natural coloration of the world” (Petrić 2001, 27, my translation). As color appeared in film, it brought an interesting point of discussion: what is black and white film? It is alike our world, but also different, its shadows are much deeper and its light much brighter.

A lot of visual culture was taught by movies and transferred into games, including the meaning of black and white in cinema (used for flashbacks or building an atmosphere, like in film noir during the 1950's). It is still upon us to challenge these views and rephrase what certain colors mean to certain scenes – some games have tried their hand at this, developing a coloristic identity which challenges our own. Games like *Cruelty Squad* (Consumer Softproducts 2021) and *Post Void* (YCJY games 2020) have taken a rather drastic approach to this, emphasizing color (overexposing the footage, using colors usually associated with differing objects etc.)

Conclusion

While Petrić focuses more of the medium of film, rather than the content of cinema, his theory proves as great groundwork upon which video games have expanded upon and built themselves into a medium of their own. Video games have leaned on the rich culture of film to bring forth new ideas and explore different aspects unexplorable by film. As the age of technology becomes even richer, we can only wait and see how this divide grows bigger and video games start shaping the visual land space, lending their own ideas to film and other visual arts. But we must never forget: film and video games are entirely different media.

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In the Ring and on the Runway: Masculinities of Drag and Wrestling from TV to Video Games

Kseniia Harshina

keywords: drag, wrestling, queer game studies, performativity

Introduction

In this paper, I explore the distinct but nevertheless intertwined worlds of drag and wrestling. With the global rise of phenomena like World of Wonder's *RuPaul's Drag Race* (Charles 2009) and World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE), these once niche subcultures have become a part of the mainstream.

Wrestling, often presented as the epitome of hegemonic masculinity, stands as a stark contrast to drag, which seeks to challenge and subvert traditional gender norms. However, on the outer fringes of these genres, wrestlers embrace the flamboyance and theatricality of drag and drag queens incorporate elements of physicality and the theatrics of wrestling into their acts.

Through this paper, I aim to illustrate the unique intersections of sport, gender, and performance, offering insights into the interplay between the two subcultures of wrestling and drag. Additionally, I will briefly cover the history of drag in wrestling as well as wrestling in drag. I will also explore how these two fields are represented in contemporary media such as television and video games, focusing on the reality TV show *RuPaul's Drag Race* (Charles 2009) as well as the game *Wrestling with Emotions* (Team Lazerbeam 2023), which illustrate the interconnection of wrestling and drag of today.

The Art of Drag

The definition of drag has been through many iterations throughout its history. What started off as the theatre of crossdressing, where the term drag was used primarily to describe a person portraying a gender that is different from their own in a theatrical context, has evolved into a distinct art form. Today, drag encompasses a wide range of expressions and is employed not only as a form of artistic self-expression but also as a means of challenging and redefining

societal norms surrounding gender and identity. From being a subversive queer movement to a global phenomenon, drag has made an impact on the performance arts and on the world.

As Moore suggests, drag pushes the boundaries of desire, body, and societal norms (2013, 15-26). It exists as a paradox, an art form that simultaneously mocks and pays homage to established notions of identity and gender.

Judith Butler (1990) emphasizes the performative nature of gender as well. According to Butler's theory, gender is not an inherent unchanging characteristic that all of us share, but a type of performance that we enact daily. In the context of drag, this becomes evident as drag queens deliberately and exaggeratedly perform gender roles, challenging the stability of traditional gender norms.

Drag is a way of highlighting the artificiality of societal norms and how they can be subverted through performance. To understand the art form of drag in a deeper way, it should not be seen as simply an imitation, but as a dynamic reimagining of gender. In the following sections, I will look at the art of drag as a means to educate, entertain, and understand gender, and the implications this entails for our discussion.

Up to this point, I have not mentioned the physicality of the art form. Oxford Learner's Dictionaries defines sport as an "activity that you do for pleasure and that needs physical effort or skill, usually done in a special area and according to fixed rules" (Oxford Learner's Dictionaries 2023). Although drag does not necessarily entail the need for physical activity, a lot, if not most, forms of drag are physically demanding. This includes, but is not limited to, gymnastic performances (see Figure 1), dangerous stunt numbers (see Figure 2), or aerial acrobatics (see Figure 3).

The relation to sport becomes all the more apparent when looking at the global phenomenon reality TV show *RuPaul's Drag Race* (Charles 2009) (henceforth *RPDR* for short). This reality TV competition puts drag queens against one another in a series of challenges including comedy, acting, lip-syncing, fashion, and impersonation. In their work, *A Queer Cooptation of Sport*, Amant (2022) argues that *RPDR* should be indeed considered as a sport, and the drag queens participating in the show should be considered athletes.

The concept of hegemonic masculinity serves as a framework for understanding how societal norms dictate and pressure individuals to conform to dominant views of masculinity. In this definition, what constitutes masculinity is rigidly constructed, emphasizing binary notions of gender, patriarchy as an essentialized necessity, biologically determined behavior, and heteronormative relational practices. This dominant form of masculinity suppresses not

only queer and gay masculinities but also hinders fluid understandings of sexuality and gender (Johnson 2005, Lanzieri, and Hildebrandt 2011).



Figure 1 - Drag queen Katya doing gymnastics at the talent show performance (Source: IMDb 2023).



Figure 2 - Tandi Iman in the famous performance that starts off with the queen jumping from the ceiling into a split on stage (Source: IN Magazine 2021).



Figure 3 - Violet Chachki performing aerial acrobatics at RuPaul DragCon (Source: Billboard 2018).

In the world of drag, resistance to hegemonic masculinity is an inherent aspect of its culture. Drag challenges the very foundations of heteronormativity and traditional masculinity. This resistance becomes particularly evident when examining the performances of drag queens, who celebrate and embody exaggerated forms of femininity, often in direct opposition to conventional male roles. One significant aspect of this resistance can be observed in *RPDR*, as analyzed by Kahn, Goddard, and Coy (2013). *RPDR* has played a pivotal role in introducing drag culture to mainstream audiences. However, its earlier seasons were not without problematic aspects. The show sometimes reinforced binary gender norms by favoring more traditionally feminine-presenting contestants as opposed to those who presented themselves in a more masculine or gender-queer manner (Kahn, Goddard and Coy 2013, 139-162). This paradox illustrates the complex relationship between drag and hegemonic masculinity, wherein drag queens can simultaneously reject and perpetuate societal expectations related to gender.

The Theatre of Wrestling

Wrestling challenges traditional categorizations by occupying a space where sport, theatre, and performance blur. Roland Barthes (1972) laid the theoretical groundwork for understanding wrestling not just as a sport but as a popular theatre. While wrestling professionals often state that wrestling is a competitive sport with real physicality, many agree that its primary function is to entertain. The choices made by wrestlers, such as which techniques to employ and when, are as much about theatrical effect as a display of physicality (Levi 1998, 275–285).

Professional wrestling, exemplified by organizations like WWE, presents many opportunities for the exploration of hegemonic masculinity. In his study, Soulliere states that television wrestling promotes hegemonic masculinity. It highlights traits such as aggression, violence, and emotional restraint, contributing to the construction of gender roles within popular culture (Soulliere 2006, 1-11).

Despite this, in the world of Western professional wrestling, Goldust and Adrian Street represent pioneering figures who were the first to define conventional notions of masculinity and gender identity in the field.

Goldust, an influential figure in the WWE, pushed the boundaries of wrestling, by introducing it to camp. Defined as an 'aesthetic spectacle' by Susan Sontag, camp is a style characterized by an ironic appreciation of deliberate extravagance, artificiality, and theatricality

(1964, 515–530). Goldust drew inspiration from classic cinema and incorporated elements of drag into his persona. Even though Goldust’s performances served as an invitation for the audience to recognize wrestling itself as a form of camp, his acts simultaneously resisted and celebrated constructs of hegemonic masculinity as stated by Bradbury (2016, 117-127).



Figure 4 - Goldust, picture taken in the mid-1990s (Source: Villains Wiki 2023).



Figure 5 - Adrian Street with his father in a coal mine (Source: The Guardian 2023).

Adrian Street's story began in the 1950s, when he left his hometown to chase the dream of becoming a wrestler in London, distancing himself from his family's coal-mining legacy (The Guardian 2023). Renowned as a heel, he excelled at riling up crowds with both his fighting skill and his unconventional appearance. His preference for flamboyant costumes, including lipstick, vibrant hair dyes, and feather boas, would later contribute to the emergence of glam rock. Figure 5 depicts Adrian Street with his father in the coal mine, where both of them used to work, showcasing the juxtaposition of Street's glamorous life as a wrestler and his humble beginnings as a coal miner.

When the Two Worlds Collide

In the world of Mexican professional wrestling, or *lucha libre*, a unique mix of drag culture and athleticism is embodied by the *exoticos*. *Exoticos* are male wrestlers who defy traditional hypermasculine norms, embracing flamboyant and effeminate personas both inside and outside the ring. Despite the hypermasculinity of the majority *lucha libre* wrestlers, the *exoticos* have always been highly-esteemed and respected within the community.

The experiences of wrestlers like Pimpinela Scarlata offer a glimpse into the impact of *exoticos*. Scarlata transitioned from wrestling as a man to fully embracing the *exotico* persona, highlighting the personal choices and challenges that wrestlers navigate in the realm of *lucha libre*:

I used the mask on three occasions, m'hija. When I started in *lucha libre* I began wrestling as a man with the title 'Vans', but later the people figured out that I wasn't a man, because they know, they aren't stupid, 'that's a joto!' they shouted. It made me ashamed, and in order to throw them off scent, I put on another mask of a man with another name: El Playboy. But sincerely, I couldn't do it, m'hija. So I put away the men's masks, and I went out camping it up [joteando] as an *exotico*. (Pimpinela Scarlata, quoted in Fascinetto 1992, 188)

Let us now discuss the collision between the worlds of today's wrestling and today's drag. One example of such a collision is 'A Matter of Pride', a Brooklyn-based wrestling organization, described as "RuPaul's Drag Race meets WWE WrestleMania". In the ring, the founder of the organization, Rick Cataldo, embodies his on-stage persona: The Boy Diva. In an interview with *Ssense*, Cataldo emphasizes that for him, wrestling serves as a medium to convey queer stories by queer performers for queer audiences, and that it places athletic ability at the forefront while combining drag and queer performance (Jones 2019).

In Season 4 of *RPDR*, contestants were challenged to combine drag with wrestling by coming up with wrestling personas and enacting a wrestling match in the ring (Charles 2012). This *RPDR* episode emphasized the theatricality of drag and wrestling. Furthermore, it

showcased how both art forms epitomize camp aesthetics and atmosphere, incorporate larger-than-life characters, as well as theatrical and athletic performances.



Figure 6 - Rick Cataldo as The Boy Diva (Source: Jones 2019).



Figure 7 - Drag queens portrayed as wrestlers on RPDR (Source: Charles 2012).



Figure 8 - The wrestling acting challenge on RPDR (Source: Charles 2012).

The Virtual Ring: From WWE2K to WwE (Wrestling with Emotions)

In contrast to other spectator media such as television, video games offer interactivity, enabling a different form of engagement with topics such as drag and wrestling. The interactive nature of video games allows players to not merely observe, but to take on the roles of wrestlers or

drag performers themselves. This is particularly evident in the game *Wrestling with Emotions* (Team Lazerbeam 2023) that is discussed later in this chapter. In this game the player takes up the role of an aspiring wrestler that has to create their wrestling persona with all of the glitz and glam it entails.

WWE2K is a series of professional wrestling video games, currently developed by Visual Concepts and published by 2K (e.g. Visual Concepts 2023). These games are officially licensed by the World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE). The WWE2K series aims to provide a realistic simulation of WWE wrestling matches, featuring a roster of WWE superstars, various gameplay modes, and the ability to create custom wrestlers and storylines. Players can engage in one-on-one matches, tag team bouts, and participate in career modes where they can guide a wrestler's career from the bottom of the ranks to championship victory.

In the world of professional wrestling video games, the WWE2K series portrays itself as a simulation of the wrestling world. Ware (2016) states that the WWE2K games represent the essence of wrestling by juxtaposing the real and the fake, accurately reflecting the nature of professional wrestling.

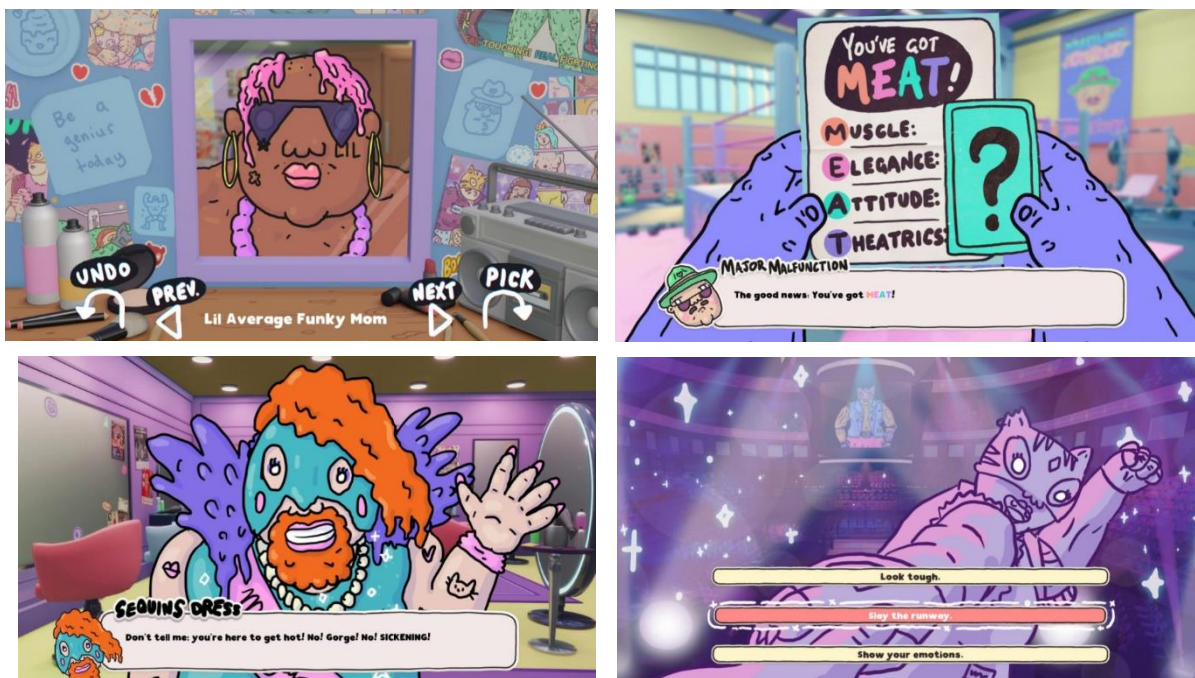


Figure 9 - Screenshots of *Wrestling with Emotions* taken by the author (Source: Team Lazerbeam 2023).

In contrast, before-mentioned *Wrestling with Emotions: New Kid on the Block* (Team Lazerbeam 2023), an indie video game, takes a different approach. *Wrestling with Emotions* is a comedic dating simulator that parodies professional wrestling. In the game, players take on

the role of a person seeking romance in a world of over-the-top and flamboyant wrestlers. The game features humorous dialogue, quirky characters, and dating scenarios reminiscent of wrestling storylines. The game fully embraces the campy atmosphere of wrestling, as flamboyant outfits and extravagant personalities contribute to the atmosphere of the game, mirroring the subversive elements seen in real-life wrestling personas like Goldust.

Conclusion: In the Ring and on the Runway

In the world of performance, drag and professional wrestling are subcultures where notions of sport, gender, and queerness intersect. Both drag and wrestling involve performances of gender, albeit in contrasting ways. Drag queens subvert gender norms through exaggerated femininity. In contrast, male wrestlers frequently embody hypermasculine stereotypes in the ring. Professional wrestling, particularly in its earlier years, has celebrated hegemonic masculinity with its emphasis on powerful, muscular bodies and aggressive behavior. Drag, on the other hand, often deconstructs and parodies these same notions. Yet, wrestlers like Adrian Street have shown that even within the wrestling world, there is room to challenge hegemonic masculinity.

Queerness is present within both drag and wrestling, even though in different forms. Drag challenges heteronormative ideas by embracing a spectrum of identities and sexualities. In wrestling, queerness has often been subversive, as seen with the exoticos who wrestle in drag.

In conclusion, both drag and wrestling, though distinct in many ways, share common threads of performance, athleticism, and subversion, which are exemplified and extended in contemporary media such as television and video games.

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Literary and Ludic Mise-en-Abyme in *What Remains of Edith Finch*

Samuele Balduzzi

keywords: mise-en-abyme, literary games, video games narrative, narrative levels, frame story, *What Remains of Edith Finch*

Introduction

What Remains of Edith Finch (Giant Sparrow 2017) is a thought-provoking first-person exploration game that tells the story of the cursed and eccentric Finch family, living in an isolated manor on a lonely island. The game is structured as a collection of short stories, each exploring the life and death of a different member of the Finch family. From the point of view of Edith, the last alive member of the Finch family, the player explores the family home and encounters various rooms and objects that serve as gateways to the individual stories of each family member. These stories are reenacted by the player in first person, each time through a different gameplay, making the game's narrative structure that of a main frame story encapsulating twelve shorter narratives. *What Remains of Edith Finch* allows the player to explore a wide range of themes, such as mortality, family, and identity through the stories of these thirteen family members seemingly doomed to die at a young age and in mysterious ways.

This essay aims to examine the innovative ways in which *What Remains of Edith Finch* utilizes a transmedial technique, mise-en-abyme, both in a literary and ludic sense to make its storytelling unique. Reliving peculiar moments of the life of the characters in the form of different media, the player inhabits the Finch family members through the main affordance of the videoludic medium: interaction. This happens by scrolling through old pictures, re-enacting scenes from a comic book, and even playing the fantasies of a character in the form of a video game inside the video game.

What Remains of Edith Finch is also peculiar in how it tells Edith's main, frame story: her exploration is accompanied by text, words, and letters appearing on and disappearing from walls and furniture in the family mansion as the player moves in the virtual environment. Even though this omnipresent textuality may seem like a mere stylistic choice, the player learns that it is diegetically justified since, through their gameplay, they are re-enacting a letter written by

a pregnant Edith for her unborn son, and read by him in an unspecified future in which she is deceased. The multiple displays of stories told through textuality inside other texts, united with the presence of a video game in the game, spark an interesting reflection on the concept of both literary and ludic mise-en-abyme in *What Remains of Edith Finch*.

Mise-En-Abyme

"Mise-en-abyme" is a term borrowed from the world of art that refers to a technique used in narrative in which a story within a story is presented. The term translates from French to "placing into the abyss" and has been thoroughly analysed by various scholars in the last few years. Fludernik defines it as

A concept taken from art theory, referring to the inset-frame structure. A frame and its inset can be called a mise-en-abyme structure if the framed element shows points of similarity to the frame. In narrative, one can speak of mise-en-abyme if an embedded story shares plot elements, structural features or themes with the main story and this makes it possible to correlate plot and subplot. (2009, 156)

One of the key aspects of this definition of mise-en-abyme in literature is the correlation between the embedded story and the main narrative. These embedded narratives often share plot elements, structural features, or thematic concerns with the primary story, enhancing our understanding of both. This interplay between narratives provides depth and complexity to the text, offering readers multiple entry points into the story's themes and ideas. An alternative characterization of literary mise-en-abyme, as articulated by Hayward, is as follows:

[mise-en-abyme] occurs within a text when there is a reduplication of images or concepts referring to the textual whole. Chinese boxes or Russian dolls are concrete examples of mise-en-abyme – the outer shell being the full-size real thing, those within a constant referral to the original. Mise-en-abyme is a play of signifiers within a text, of sub-texts mirroring each other. This mirroring can get to the point where meaning can be rendered unstable and in this respect can be seen as part of the process of deconstruction. (2013, 231. See also Snow 2016, 2-3 for more definitions)

This second definition adopts a more abstract and theoretical stance, emphasizing the destabilizing potential of this literary and artistic device within the realm of semiotics and deconstruction. It is clear how mise-en-abyme in literature can easily lead to unreliability in the embedded narratives, as is the case in *What Remains of Edith Finch*.

However, can we consider the concept of literary mise-en-abyme applicable to other media, such as video games? In the next chapter, we shall explore this question.

What Remains of Edith Finch as a Literary Game

According to Ensslin (2014), literary video games combine literary and ludic elements, using narrative, dramatic, and poetic techniques to explore the possibilities and limitations of game structures (1). They differ from conventional word games and eBooks, as they are digital games with a focus on linguistic or poetic material. Poetic games are a type of computer game that emphasizes creative and artistic engagement with linguistic and poetic units. They replace typical game elements with linguistic material to highlight the idea of a verbal art underlying their design and challenge players' attention by requiring deep engagement with textual material (141).

Literary games can also be considered a form of ergodic literature (see Aarseth 1997) because the acts of reading are built into the mechanics of the game and require successful engagement from the player to progress. Like ergodic literature, literary games challenge the reader/player to interact with the text/game in a deeper and more engaged way, emphasizing the creative and artistic potential of combining literature and ludic elements. Other scholars have further analysed the thin line that both separates and connects literature and games (see Picard 2008, Jenkins 2004, Hayot 2021, Zimmerman 2004).

One could argue that *What Remains of Edith Finch* is more readable than playable, since the player's interaction with the game environment is very limited, as is the case in all walking simulators. However, in Bozdog and Galloway's article "Worlds at Our Fingertips: Reading (in) *What Remains of Edith Finch*" (2020), they reach the conclusion that *What Remains of Edith Finch* is a video game that "combines literary elements with environmental storytelling and expressive interaction schemes to create a hybrid readerly/playerly experience" (804) and achieve a new level of interpretive play for walking simulators. Furthermore, by understanding walking simulators as literary games, they argue that the focus can shift from their lack of "traditional" gameplay complexity to the opportunities they afford for hybrid storytelling, for weaving literature and gameplay in innovative and playful ways (794).

Demonstrating the ludic-literary nature of *What Remains of Edith Finch* underscores the significance of literary mise-en-abyme within its structural composition. The forthcoming chapter will delve into the theme of embedded narrative, revealing how it serves as a distinctive indicator of the presence of mise-en-abyme.

Literary Mise-en-Abyme in *What Remains of Edith Finch*

Bozdog and Galloway describe different strategies used by the writers and developers of *What Remains of Edith Finch* to make it a literary game. The first of these strategies is "engaging with

various literary structures, themes, forms and genres” (2020, 793). It can be argued that mise-en-abyme is one of these elements. In fact, the game's narrative structure is made up of three main levels of narration often showing similarities to each other.



Figure 1 - Barbara's story, a third-level narrative accessed through a comic book. The player controls Barbara in some crucial panels of the comics (Source: Giant Sparrow 2017).

The first and most superficial level of narration is the one in which Edith's son reads his mother's diary in front of her tombstone. The second level of narration, which we may consider the main one, or the frame story, tells Edith's journey through the quaint rooms of her family's mansion, exploring dusty environments and lost memories. The stories of Edith's deceased family members are relived by her through objects that serve as gateways to the third level of narration. Most of these portals are letters, diaries, or poems written on paper; when Edith starts reading these texts, the game animates the words, making them shine and float while the rooms, the other objects, and the whole environment slowly disappear to give space to a video ludic representation of the character's life and death. Some of these gateways, however, are not textual but belong to other media. The three most interesting examples are the stories of Odin, accessed through a newsreel inside an old stereoscope, Barbara, entered through a horror comic book, and Sam, starting when Edith takes a closer look at some printed photographs. Some scholars have already explored in more detail these frequent shifts of point of view, first-person avatars, and player's identification with different characters on various

depth levels of narrative, focusing on queer textual structures (Boers 2019, 46) and metaleptic jumps between different reality realms (Zitzelsberger 2020, 80).

The narrative structure composed by a frame story and several shorter tales is a tool very frequently employed in the history of literature, for example in classic works such as Boccaccio's *Decameron* (Boccaccio [ca. 1353] 2003), Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (Chaucer [ca. 1387-1400] 2003), or the traditional Arabic *One Thousand and One Nights* (Anonymous [ca. 8th-14th century] 1990). The peculiarity of *What Remains of Edith Finch* comes from the fact that the frame narrative is itself a second-level narrative, part of the external story of Edith's son reading her diary. Considering that most of the third-level narratives that Edith triggers are accessed through letters, poems, and texts in general, we can argue that *mise-en-abyme* is present throughout the whole game. That is because the act of playing/reading *What Remains of Edith Finch* is, in some way, mirrored in the multiple and embedded acts of reading shown in the game.

Nonetheless, it is imperative to acknowledge that *What Remains of Edith Finch* fundamentally belongs to the video game genre. Focusing exclusively on its literary aspects would diminish the importance of its ludic and interactive elements. Therefore, in the forthcoming chapter, we posit the existence of ludic *mise-en-abyme* within *What Remains of Edith Finch*.

Ludic *Mise-en-Abyme*: Lewis's Story

Mise-en-abyme is not common in video games but has already been observed in games such as *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Café 2013), which "references not so much the act of reading, as the act of using a computer, and similarly allows the work to leave its own borders, or rather – to pull the player and physical reality across these borders" (Kubinski 2017, 48). In *What Remains of Edith Finch* there is no evident representation of the act of using a computer or playing a video game, which might lead to think that *mise-en-abyme* finds no place in this narrative.

However, the attentive player/reader must have noticed a fourth-level narrative in the game, precisely in Lewis's story, which is represented in a form which is arguably that of a video game. Lewis's story is accessed through a letter written by his psychologist after his death. Edith reads the letter, after which the player is brought to the usual third-level narration, this time controlling Lewis's right arm while he chops fish heads working in a cannery. Lewis's dissatisfaction with his monotone life and job, combined with his recent recovery from abuse of psychotropic substances, boosts his vivid imagination which creates bright, entertaining, and

adventurous stories and scenarios that play in his mind in an increasingly realistic manner while he works. This is the only instance in the game in which the narration reaches the fourth level of depth. Lewis's story is in fact produced by his imagination, summarized in the psychologist's letter, which is described by Edith in her diary, which is finally read by her son in the present time. The more Lewis's story grows, and the more glorious, titillating, and engaging it becomes, the more it takes him away from the real world. When he realizes the bleakness of his real life compared to the splendour of the world his mind created, he decides to end his life in this world, maybe to reach the majesty of the other.

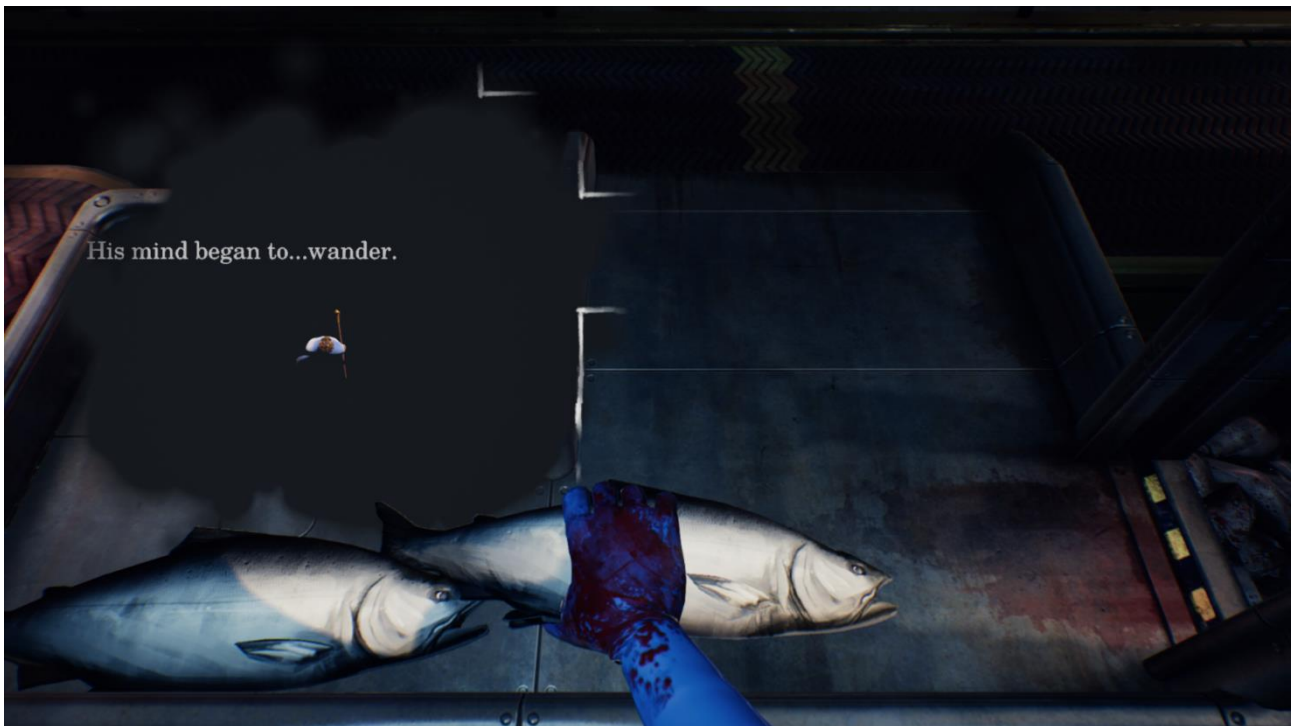


Figure 2 - Lewis's story. The screen is divided between the fish-beheading minigame on the lower left and the beginning of the fourth-level narrative on the right (Source: Giant Sparrow 2017).

Lewis's imagination is represented in the game through a mini-game appearing on the left part of the screen while the player continues their monotonous, manual fish-beheading job. The part of the screen dedicated to the imaginary world grows with the progress of the story, while the fish continue appearing and disappearing on the screen as Lewis automatically cuts their head off. In the same way, the player keeps interacting with the fish for the duration of the whole story, by moving the mouse from left to right. This movement soon becomes automatic for the player as well, because a bigger and bigger part of their focus is shifted towards the imaginary world. Lewis's fantasy is controlled through the keyboard, and his imaginary avatar moving in this virtual space becomes the player's avatar controlled by the WASD keys, commonly used for moving the avatar in most computer games (including Edith

in *What Remains of Edith Finch*). Furthermore, the story imagined by Lewis is the reenactment of typical quests of videogames: he first needs to find the exit of a labyrinth, then sail on a river and conquer cities, and even make narrative choices, typical of the video ludic medium, that shape at the same time his fantasy and the psychologist's report. Finally, we can observe how the depiction of the images constituting the imagined world resembles typical visual perspectives adopted by games throughout the years: at first, Lewis strides through the labyrinth in a top-down perspective, which becomes isometric when he heads out. When he embarks on the ship the virtual world becomes that of a world map in strategic games; after getting off the boat Lewis is shown in the perspective of a third-person game, and the finale of this fantasy is experienced by the player in a first-person fashion. Further hints point to the fact that the player is experiencing a game within the game. Video game consoles both in Lewis's room and in his cabinet at the cannery signal that his imagination might have been heavily influenced by the video game medium. Furthermore, Lewis himself, in a quote read by the psychologist, states that his fantasy "look[ed] like a game" (Giant Sparrow 2017). It is hence clear how the representation of Lewis's fantasy is a unique example of ludic mise-en-abyme in a video game.



Figure 3 - Lewis's story. The fourth-level narration, now in the grand strategy video game aesthetics, takes more space on the screen. By manoeuvring the ship, the player can shape elements in Lewis's fantasy (Source: Giant Sparrow 2017).

Conclusion

This essay has shown how *What Remains of Edith Finch* is a groundbreaking literary video game that employs mise-en-abyme and complex narrative structures to create an immersive and meaningful storytelling experience. The use of literary and ludic mise-en-abyme in the game further enhances its unique storytelling capabilities. Ultimately, the game's emphasis on media and their relationship, as well as multiple levels of narration is more important than the game's supposed main theme: the family curse. To reflect on this last statement, if one were to analyze the story of *What Remains of Edith Finch*, one would notice how the events that took place at the Finch house remain veiled by a thick shroud of mystery. This mystery is made of incompleteness, magic, fantasies, desires and fears, truth and lies, and subjectivity permeating the thirteen stories of its inhabitants, which leave the family curse unexplained and unresolved. In the end, the game leaves the player with more questions than answers, the most compelling of which being: what remains of Edith Finch?

The simplest answer to this question is: her diary, and her story. As the player explores rooms and hidden passages of the Finch mansion, and as they relive the Finch family members' lives through moving texts, unreliable narratives and emulations of other media, they are encouraged to reflect on the role that storytelling and media play in shaping our understanding of a narrative, of fiction and of the world in general. *What Remains of Edith Finch* represents a significant achievement in the field of video game storytelling and stands as a prime example of how literary techniques such as mise-en-abyme can be utilized to push the boundaries of the medium.

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Implicit Messages in the Edutainment Game *The Oregon Trail*

Ylva Schütz

keywords: Oregon Trail, edutainment games, neoliberalism, ideology

Introduction

Starting in 1971, *The Oregon Trail* (Rawitsch, Heinemann, and Dillenberger [1971] 1974) was developed as an educational tool for pupils in Minneapolis, leading to massive success and popularity. However, how it attempts to teach is problematic, and, surprisingly, this has not been addressed in wider understandings of the game.

With how many versions of *The Oregon Trail* exist, I deliberated which one to analyse. I decided to focus on the oldest, still accessible version published by the Minnesota Educational Computing Consortium (MECC) that was played by school students. How are the landscape and its inhabitants represented and treated? And how may this shape real-world understandings of them?

In this paper, I first examine what *The Oregon Trail* game is and what the Oregon Trail was in a historical sense. On that base, I analyse *The Oregon Trail* game, its implicit messages and worldviews that show themselves as unconsidered and in alignment with neoliberal and colonialist ideology.

What is *The Oregon Trail* Game?

Developed by college student Don Rawitsch and two others, *The Oregon Trail* was first used in a high school in Minneapolis in 1971. The developers' goal was to "enliven their American history course" which led them to create a strategic, text-based game that had players "manage their resources, hunt, caulk their wagons, and battle weather and disease as they journeyed westward from the Missouri River to the Pacific Ocean" (Rankin 2018, 155). Through joining the MECC, Rawitsch was able to develop a polished version of the game for schools in the United States (National Museum of Play, n.d.). The game's many iterations and versions sold over 65 million copies (ibid.) and were ported to various platforms. According

to the National Museum of Play, “[i]t is the most popular, influential educational video game of all time” (ibid.).

In an analysis of *The Oregon Trail* CD-ROM, Bill Bigelow argues that the early published versions of the game are “sexist, racist, culturally insensitive, and contemptuous of the earth” (Bigelow 1997, 85). The latest version of *The Oregon Trail* was published in 2022 by Gameloft as a thoroughly updated iteration. For example, the representation of Native Americans happens not only through the eyes of white settlers within the game: players can also play as Native Americans. On their website, Gameloft states:

For Indigenous Peoples, westward expansion was not an adventure but an invasion. Recognizing this complex history, we have collaborated with Native American scholars to bring a new level of respectful representation to the game. (The Oregon Trail n.d.)

Before this version was published, in 2016, the game was inducted into the Hall of Fame of the National Museum of Play (National Museum of Play, n.d.), and in 2017, Don Rawitsch gave a GDC talk about the development process (Rawitsch 2017). The topic of representation is considered within the talk, but only in one instance: Rawitsch explains that he adjusted the portrayal and interactions with Native Americans based on diary entries of white settlers who often received help and were not attacked by Native Americans (ibid., 34:00-35:10).

However, the ways in which this game taught is problematic, especially if taking its massive popularity between 1979 to 1995 into consideration (ibid., 5:50-6:00). A short overview of the Oregon Trail, historically speaking, will help to pinpoint these problems.

What was the Oregon Trail?

In its historical and geographical sense, the Oregon Trail was an emigrant path from East to West of North America, travelled mostly by white pioneers in the mid-1800s in wagon trains. With its 2170 miles, it was established after many trials and errors by governmental, private, or economic institutions (Lavender 1963). While it is often framed as a mystical, legendary, and brave endeavour for pioneers to master this journey (5, 26; Bureau of Land Management n.d.), it means something entirely different to the native inhabitants of this continent. Over centuries, they were dispossessed, oppressed, and killed in a myriad of ways so that white settlers would gain access to and possession of North America’s resources and land (Miller 2008, 9, 113).

While the trail was mostly travelled by civilians, and while many of the reports of their interactions are described as non-violent, with Native Americans helping the pioneers find food, water, and direction (Lavender 1963, 36, 394; Josephy 1992, 14), there still was a massive

negative impact on Native Americans. One, the movement of so many people through the land disturbed the local nature and wildlife, aggravated by exhaustive hunting of e.g., bison or deforestation (Deloria 1992, 548). Two, through the carrying of diseases the Native Americans had no immune system built against, such as measles (Lavender 1963, 398). And three, the cultural and social relations understood by Native Americans and emigrants differed starkly, resulting in massacres and attacks described as ‘unprovoked’ if they came from a tribe of Native Americans, and as a protective measure if the white settlers were the ones leading them (399; Ostler 2019, 380).

However, the white settlers – and ultimately the United States – were and still are majorly unaware or ignorant of the mass extinction they pursued. For example:

There is almost no recognition that the U.S. officials established a policy of exterminating Indians who opposed their will, [and] that the “just and lawful war” clause of the Northwest Ordinance [from 1787] meant genocidal war. (Ostler 2019, 381)

Of course, this Northwest Ordinance and the Oregon Trail did not take place in the same century. Still, they are related in how their harmful impact is ignored by people profiting from them. If some of the white settlers understood parts of the pain they caused, people in power explained it as “sanctioned by god” (380), as Manifest Destiny (Miller 2008, 161).

While often depicted as a brave journey, the Oregon Trail is part of the destruction white settlers caused Native Americans and nature. The still-missing understanding of the trail’s repercussions is made visible by people planning to re-travel it and engaging in nostalgia with its memory (Buck 2016; Rawitsch 2017, 1:20-1:35). This can also be partly observed in the following analysis of *The Oregon Trail* game.

Analysis of *The Oregon Trail*

The Oregon Trail is text-based, in some parts supported by pixel graphics. The faster a player finishes the trail and the more equipment and pioneers they still have, the more points they gain. Players have a couple of choices in the beginning as to whom to play as, when to set out from Independence, Missouri, and which equipment to procure. Their wagon cannot carry more than 2000 pounds, so players must hunt for food at some point in the game.

Afterwards, players are shown a pixel graphic background of Independence, as they will at future landmarks. And finally, they arrive at a screen giving an overview of the pioneer’s status and options on what to do (Figure 1). Option 8 and 9 will only show up when reaching towns (like Independence). While on the trail, option 8 will instead be “Hunt for food” and includes a mini game that will be examined in the next sub-chapter.

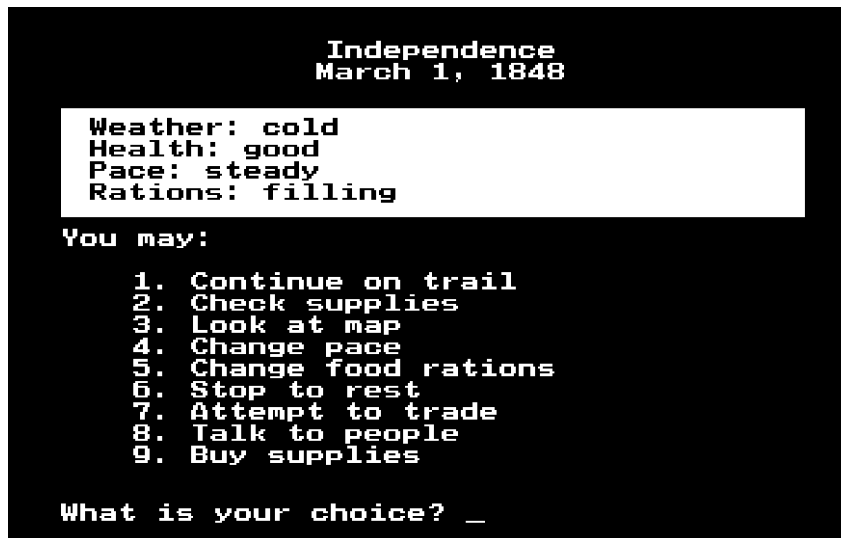


Figure 1 - user interface/ menu throughout the game (Own Screenshot of *The Oregon Trail* at Internet Archive n.d.).

Trading (7.) will often be a disadvantageous choice, but it can become player's only choice to progress. How much the pioneers eat (5.) and rest (6.) and how fast they travel (4.) will impact the health of them and of the Oxen. These animals are also impacted by the landscape and its ability to sustain them. They can get injured and die, resulting in slower pace or complete stop. Checking the map (3.) shows players their progress as well as rivers and landmarks (Figure 3).

Players now manage their decisions and equipment in response to randomised events (bandits, sicknesses) as well as scripted ones (river crossings, route selection). When reaching the end, the pioneers turn into settlers, profiting from laws that allow them to take possession of the land around Oregon.

Hunting Mini Game

Hunting in this version of the game is depicted through a 2D mini game in which players can shoot a rifle in the direction of animals while they run by. There are different kinds of animals (hares, foxes, bison, deer, bears), and they change depending on the environment. To illustrate how convincing the game is when playing it the first time, I will now describe my initial experience of it:

The first two times playing this game, I shot as many as I could as the pioneers I played were running out of food. But then I noticed that the over 1000 pounds of Bison and deer

could not be brought back to the wagon; only 100 pounds maximum. I looked for a way to increase the food that can be carried back, or to only shoot smaller animals so at least there would be less waste. It is rather challenging to successfully hunt exactly 100 pounds, resulting either in not enough food per hunting day (a loss in a strategizing game) or in excessive waste. The mini game allows for no adjustments which means that even if players hunt more than 100 pounds right at the start of the mini game, they must wait until it ends. It therefore incentivizes to shoot more of the animals in bored waiting.

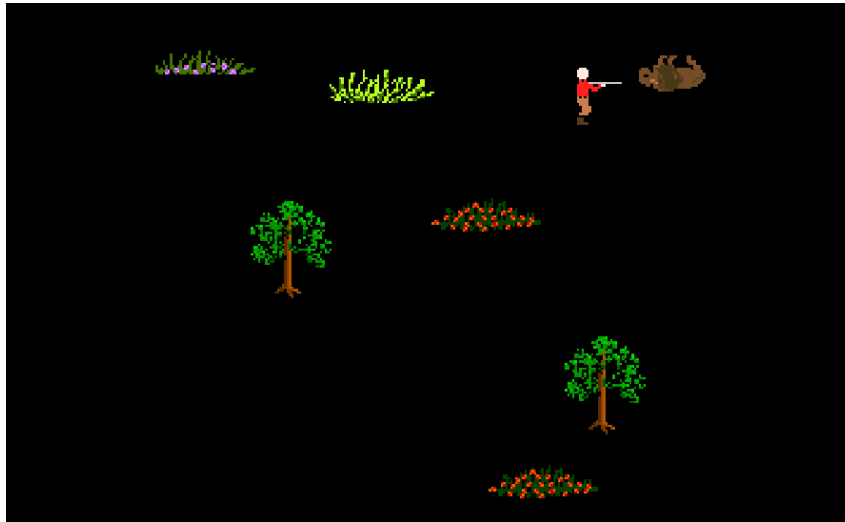


Figure 2 - the hunting mini game with one killed bison (Own Screenshot of *The Oregon Trail* at Internet Archive n.d.).

The Treatment of Animals and Landscape

While the mini game reflects on hunting behaviours of white settlers in North America, it is implemented too implicitly, without critique into the game. Even the phrasing of the message (that 100 pounds can be carried back) shifts the focus away from the 900 pounds of cadavers left behind. There are no negative consequences if players kill too many animals to even carry, and the mini game nudges them to overhunt. Landscapes and their animal inhabitants are tightly connected and carry “local symbolic associations” (Roe 2013, 402) which highlights the pioneers’ disregard towards the landscape and animals and the Native Americans relying on them. While the oxen are valued in this game, they are only valued because of their function of keeping the wagon going. There are no specific actions to care for them, even if they are injured.

During the trek, the landscape is shown as a scenic backdrop, but through informative pop-ups ('bad water', 'fog') it is also strategically connected to how well the oxen can drink and feed and how well the pioneers may travel. A secondary visualisation of landscape happens through the map with option 3. Not just in this game, but maps in general lead to a perception of a world already conquered and 'civilized', as something that ought to be that way. The box on the bottom of the screen informs players which elements are of importance, but it is a map that seems specifically made by and for pioneers; no mention of wildlife or the areas inhabited by Native Americans. At the same time, it is a gamified version as well that adapts to players' progress and adds little stars to the START and FINISH of the game.



Figure 3 - map of the 'Oregon Trail' (Own Screenshot of *The Oregon Trail* at Internet Archive n.d.).

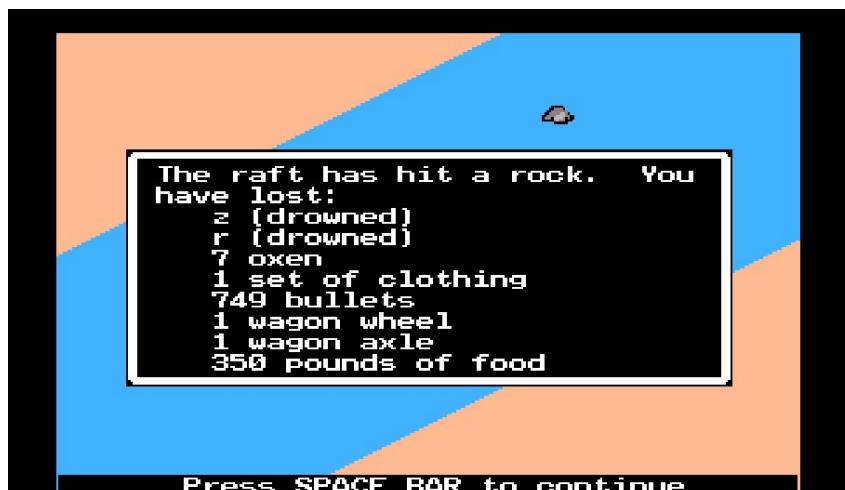


Figure 4 - floating down a river (Own Screenshot of *The Oregon Trail* at Internet Archive n.d.).

As the most detailed interaction with natural forces, river crossings receive various choices (caulk, ferry, or pay a Native American to help) and have differing chances on how well they go. At the end of the trip, if players choose to go this route, they can put their wagon onto a raft and steer it down the river, trying to evade rocks with arrow keys. Overall, this leads to an understanding of nature and its inhabitants as something that is needed and taken advantage of as resource, as beautiful yet dangerous, and as something to be mapped and taken into possession.

Implications made by *The Oregon Trail*

While this game is mainly described as an educational game, through its focus on management and decision-making it is also a strategic game in which time and resources must be controlled strictly. For example, shooting the biggest animal or enough animals to always reach the 100-pound maximum on a hunt. Within this mini game, the active exploitation of nature is the easiest, most rewarded strategy to gain the maximum amount of food. This sentiment extends outside of *The Oregon Trail* when Praschak, Ancuta and Schmidt examine expansion as part of neoliberalism in strategy games. In them, growth is framed as the only mode of survival because everyone is expanding their money, social power, and property: “Neoliberalism classifies and justifies this as self-interest, which it perceives as a moral mode competition” (Praschak, Ancuta, and Schmidt 2020, 83). Considering the Oregon Trail was a massive endeavour giving access to the West of the continent to white settlers, it is easy to understand as a means to give property to not only individuals, but to a state established on the “ethnic cleansing” (Ostler 2019, 386) of other inhabitants. When playing, taking up the trail is similarly not framed as a decision but as a fact of life, as a brave journey to survive, and as something everyone around the player is doing¹. By engaging students with this version of history, depicting the Oregon Trail as a tool needed for expansion and growth amplifies its messaging through the players’ agency (Praschak, Ancuta, and Schmidt 2020, 82).

The existence of a game that lets players inhabit white pioneers supports the notion of ‘emigration’ as something without ill intentions. The manual for the game would be a good place to offer critical insights and contextualisation that Egenfeldt-Nielsen finds fundamental in a classroom context (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith, and Tosca 2008, 253), but it only explains the game and ‘factual knowledge’ about the trail (MECC 1985). Players are not given the choice to acknowledge their own position as at least partly responsible for the destruction of life, and

¹ Interestingly, not only NPCs do this, but also other players in this version of the game. If they die at certain points, they can leave a message on a gravestone that may be encountered later by other players.

players are not given the choice to ask if they are allowed to travel this way even though it impacted the Native Americans massively in terms of their food sources, their cultural relations, and the land they could safely inhabit. Giving this version of history no space in the game and not clarifying that it is only one version and not 'factual' history means that players will gently cement their beliefs that there were no major conflicts between white settlers and Native Americans on or due to the Oregon Trail.

This is not to say that games cannot or should not focus on problematic themes in history and similar, but rather that they need to approach them in different ways. Some edutainment concepts show promise: Games-For-Change or Gamification (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith, and Tosca 2008, 266), the Tamástslikt Cultural Institute as a multi-voice, interactive museum experience (Miller 2005, 220), or game design processes that necessitate close teamwork of the developers with local citizens and culture to teach about their relevance (Rouse 2019, 47).

Conclusion

It becomes evident that the Oregon Trail from white settler (retro-)perspective and a perspective focused on larger developments with North American nature and inhabitants do not overlap much with each other. This same missing understanding is to be observed in the mentioned romanticised re-imagination of the Oregon Trail and in the induction of the game into a hall of fame. While Don Rawitsch seems to understand the problematic nature of the first game with his response that he would nowadays tell it from a Native American's perspective (Rawitsch 2017, 57:55-58:09), a few minutes before (50:59-51:50) he had already shown that his understanding of diversity is limited and does not take intersectional difficulties nor his own privilege into consideration. He does not go into detail as to what exactly *The Oregon Trail* portrayed in a bad way, instead superficially explaining it as only showing one perspective – which cannot simply be remedied by releasing a game with differing perspectives in the future. If we keep in mind that this game was used to teach in schools without critical contextualisation, its implicit neoliberal message which justifies the forceful appropriation and abuse of Native American land through white settlers becomes especially potent. In this non-issue approach and its celebration as a popular and successful edutainment game, *The Oregon Trail* reveals itself as a symptom of a society disbelieving its own destructive history.

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King Arthur as a Romanceable Anime Girl: Depictions of Arthurian Legends in Japanese Video Games

Tom Tuček

keywords: Japanese video games, Arthurian legends, reimagination, gender representation, intercultural studies, *Fate/stay night*, *The Legend of Zelda*

Introduction

This paper analyses the depiction of King Arthur and Arthurian legends in Japanese video games, mainly focusing on *Fate/stay night* (Type-Moon 2004) and the *The Legend of Zelda* franchise (Nintendo 1986 to 2023). It explores how contemporary Japanese video games reimagine Arthurian legends in stark contrast to their original British sources (e.g. Malory [1470] 1998; [1485] 2009), the transformation of King Arthur into a romanceable female character, and the incorporation of Excalibur-like myths in Japanese video games. The analysis highlights the impact of Arthurian legends on Japanese video games and their unique interpretations.

The story of King Arthur plays an undeniably important role in popular culture in the Anglosphere, as can be seen in successful novelisations (e.g. White 1958), movies (e.g. Reitherman 1963; Gilliam and Jones 1975; Ritchie 2017), as well as video games (e.g. NeocoreGames 2009; Ready at Dawn 2015). Not only in popular culture but also in academic discourses across different fields (see Littleton and Malcor 2013; Jubb 2015; Kiernan 2016; Coldham-Fussell, Edlich-Muth, and Ward 2022), the legend of the boy who pulled a sword from a stone and became King of Britain is still relevant to this day.

Meanwhile, Japanese popular culture has become a significant international force, impacting other countries' cultures around the globe in this era of globalisation. Primarily through popular media like video games and anime, with the label of "Cool Japan," the country's soft power and diplomacy via culture have been unparalleled in recent decades (see Iwabuchi 2015). Although cultures and history might differ between Britain and Japan, many similarities exist, such as representing isolated island nations or their histories with feudalism and gender roles. The last point is exemplified by the patriarchal society present in both countries throughout history, with women being deemed subservient to men and having to focus on childrearing, especially so in the times of knights (see HistoryLearning 2023) or samurai (see

Ibnat 2023). With Japan as a comparable yet radically different country, this paper presents and discusses Japanese depictions and interpretations of what is arguably the most important story of the British Renaissance.

Arthurian Legends and Video Games

Arthurian legends have established a solid presence in video games, predominantly in the medieval fantasy genre, but also in different settings, e.g. in *The Order: 1886* (Ready at Dawn 2015) and its alternate-history steampunk London. A more detailed analysis of Western video game depictions of King Arthur and his legend, ranging from early adaptations like *Lancelot* (Level 9 1988) to recent AAA titles like *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt Red 2015), can be found in the work of McKenzie (2022).

The general popularity of Arthurian themes in video games can be attributed to several factors. Aside from the setting of the fantastic Camelot presenting an attractive inspiration for fantasy video games and a wide cast of characters that can be employed as archetypes, the general cultural awareness of Arthurian legends makes them easily referenceable. This allows game designers to implement evocative spaces, which enable players to recognise certain elements and thus construct a narrative with reference to external media by themselves (see Jenkins 2004, 123-124). A simple example of this can be found in the idea of drawing a sword from a pedestal in a video game, allowing for an instant association with Arthur, thus possibly evoking feelings in the player of performing a rite of passage, being deemed worthy, becoming more powerful, or taking on responsibility.

Japanese video games have also adopted the tales of King Arthur. The *Star Arthur Densetsu* (T&E Soft 1983) trilogy of early point-and-click adventure games depicted King Arthur as the main character in a futuristic space opera setting. Side-scrolling games like *Ghosts 'n Goblins* (Capcom 1985) or *King Arthur's World* (Argonaut Games 1992) continued this trend with their unique interpretations of Arthurian lore. However, after the turn of the millennium, King Arthur started appearing in a new genre of Japanese video games – so-called visual novels or dating simulations.

Fate/stay night began this trend with a gender-swapped King Arthur, who took the role of a main character and a possible romance option. Other game developers followed and allowed players to take on the role of a female King Arthur to pursue a romance with the other Knights of the Round Table (Idea Factory 2013) or depicted Arthur as one of many romanceable heroines (Tencho 2012, see Figure 1). Comparable games in which Arthur remains male appear sparse (e.g. Anisetta 2011).



Figure 1 - Arthur, as depicted in Eiyuu*Senki (Tenco 2012) (Source: VNDB 2021).

These portrayals of Arthur as a conquerable woman starkly contrast the Western image of King Arthur as a strong and just, albeit flawed, masculine monarch. These qualities remain predominantly intact with *Fate/stay night's* Artoria, but not necessarily with Eiyuu*Senki's Arthur, who is described instead as "[a]n idol hero who charms everyone with her overflowing charisma" (VNDB 2021). Steering towards the territory of reverse exoticisation (with exoticism indicating an originally Eurocentric fascination with foreign countries, the reverse can signify a foreign country's overt fascination and glamorisation of European culture), Arthur is used here as the fetishised and mysterious Other (see Mountz 2009), feminised, subordinated, and to be wanted and conquered by players. While othering is a concept used in various fields of study, such as postcolonial theory or critical theory, especially the feminist and culture-studies usage of the term applies here – as Arthur is now both the Other in terms of sex (for a predominantly male audience) as well as in terms of geographical belonging (for the originally Japanese audience).

Fate/stay night

Fate/stay night originated as a visual novel – a narrative-focused and primarily text-based video game, or *cybertext* (Aarseth 1997), allowing the player's choices to impact how the story unfolds. The game achieved immense success and popularity in Japan, spawning a franchise including multiple anime adaptations (Studio Deen 2006; Ufotable 2011; Ufotable 2014; Sudō 2017; A-1 Pictures 2017) and (non-visual-novel) video games (e.g. Eighting 2008; Type-Moon 2010). It also led to the development of the mobile game *Fate/Grand Order* (Lasengle 2015),

which is especially noteworthy, as it achieved worldwide highest player spending in 2018 (Clayton 2018) and ranked seventh in the list of highest-grossing mobile games of all time (PocketGamer.biz Staff 2022).

All media from the *Fate* franchise follow the premise of ‘Holy Grail Wars’, in which mages summon famous historical figures who fight for them as so-called servants. *Fate/stay night* tells the story of the Fifth Holy Grail War from the perspective of the protagonist and player-insert Emiya Shirō, who accidentally summons a servant. This heroic spirit is named Saber (after one of seven classes used for servants in the game’s setting), with her secret identity being that of King Arthur, who was canonically a woman within the game’s universe (see Figure 2). Saber is romanceable, meaning that players’ choices can lead to developing a romantic relationship between Saber and Emiya, including graphic sex scenes.



Figure 2 - In-game sprite of Saber, from *Fate/stay night* (Source: Type-Moon Wiki 2022).

Saber's role within the game is multi-faceted. As a servant, she takes the role of a knight (rather than a king) sworn to protect her master (the literal term she uses to refer to Emiya) and pursue his goals as her own. She embodies the virtues of loyalty and justice, reflecting key attributes of King Arthur. However, unlike in the original works, she can be deemed more elegant than mighty, focusing on her fighting skill through agility and wisdom rather than sheer strength or social position (see Fauziah 2018, 27-34). The story delves into her complex character, gradually revealing aspects of her identity, such as her past, weaknesses, flaws, and regrets. Although these aspects potentially correspond to the woes of Malory's King Arthur,

they are used in *Fate/stay night* to portray Saber as opening up to Emiya and thus the player, making the relationship a more intimate one. Both physical and psychological intimacy can thus be seen as a reward to the player for making the correct decisions within the game.

Excalibur in Japanese Video Games

Swords hold a prominent place in Japanese culture – for various reasons, such as being symbols of duality (e.g. war and peace) or status (see Roach 2014). They often appear in fantasy video games, and the trope of the sword in the stone is no exception, as it shows up repeatedly across many Japanese video games and series – with the longest-running and most recognisable example being the *The Legend of Zelda* series. The Master Sword, introduced in *The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past* (Nintendo 1991), mirrors Excalibur's unique power to vanquish evil. To acquire it, Link, the player character, must draw it from a pedestal in each game, which is only possible after proving himself worthy (see *Figure* and *Figure*).

The parallel between the Master Sword and Excalibur is unmistakable, as both are magical swords which can only be drawn from their resting place by those deemed worthy of it, with the title bestowed upon its wielder (i.e. King of Britain, Hero of Time) entailing both status and obligation. This last aspect – the blessing being a double-edged sword – seems to be highlighted even more so in Japanese media, as can be seen in the story of Artoria wishing to save Britain by retroactively preventing herself from becoming King, as well as in Link having to sacrifice some aspect of himself (e.g. his youth, his humanity) in return for saving the kingdom from evil.



Figure 3 – The Master Sword, hidden in the lost woods; from *A Link to the Past* (Source: Suika Nine 2013).



Figure 4 - The Master Sword in *Ocarina of Time* (Nintendo 1998) (Source: Diatsu 2009).

Further examples of Excalibur in video games include the *Final Fantasy* series (Square 1987 to Square Enix 2016), where the sword can be found as one of the mightiest weapons attainable in most games or as wielded by King Arthur in the "Knights of the Round" summoning spell in *Final Fantasy VII* (Square 1997). The *Golden Sun* series continues this trend, with a longsword of the same name being one of the most powerful weapons attainable in multiple of its games (Camelot Software Planning 2002; 2010). The enduring appeal of the sword in the stone motif is a testament to its cultural significance in both Western and Japanese cultures.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to showcase various representations and depictions of Arthurian legends in Japanese video games, focusing primarily on King Arthur and his sword, Excalibur. The former was turned into a female character with surprising consistency, while either retaining the King's conventional attributes or discarding them. Regardless, Japanese depictions of King Arthur often resort to extreme mythologisation, while presenting him as a conquerable Other at the same time.

The example of Saber from the *Fate* franchise shows that Arthur can be dealt with as a complex character in Japan, regardless of his sex. This depiction of the Once and Future King eventually became the face of one of the highest-grossing media franchises in Japan and worldwide. His sword, Excalibur, retains cultural significance in both Japan and the West as well, serving as a popular trope to signify a character's might, prowess, or a rite of passage that has to be undertaken by the hero of the story, such as in many instances of the *The Legend of Zelda* franchise.

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