Mechanisms of World Creation in the American Video Game Industry

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Mechanisms of World Creation in the American Video Game Industry

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Contents

1. Introduction

The premise of this paper is the analysis of video game structure with the purpose of expanding the inventory of cultural artefacts suitable for critical exploration. The paper proposes that the mechanisms which sustain the structure of video games offer a space viable for critical inquiry into the founding paradigms of American Studies and, consequently, the American society. More accurately, the contention of this paper is concerned with the idea that video games represent new grounds for the narration of myths and symbols integral to the conception of the American nation. These new digital spaces of narration rely on two sets of structuring principles which orchestrate their design. One is embedded in the study of narrative, while the other in the study of games. In other words, the analysis of the hybrid structure of video games requires both narrative and ludic tools to decipher the method of portraying the cultural patterns of the American nation within a digital space. For that reason, this paper investigates narrative structuring rules as well as the elements of play to present the background mechanisms that sustain the medium of video games. The American Studies methodology of the paper is centered around the works of Perry Miller and R. W. B. Lewis. In that respect, the paradigms applied in the argumentation are: American Adam, American innocence and exceptionalism, and the errand into the wilderness. The methodology of the "myth-and-symbol" school is introduced by way of Bruce Kuklick's article "Myth and Symbol in American Studies" and Julie Thompson Klein's work *Humanities, Culture, and Interdisciplinarity: The Changing American Academy*. The narrative strand of the methodology deals with the basic principles of constructing stories and relies on Seymour Chatman's *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*. In this segment, the paper covers the essential properties of narrative, how events are sequenced into a story, and how they are represented to the reader by way of discourse. Using narratology as a point of departure, the paper moves on to analyze games and the experience of playing. The basic properties of games are introduced by way of Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, and *Playful Identities: The Ludification of Digital Media Cultures*, collaboratively written by Valerie Frissen, Sybille Lammes, Michel de Lange, Jos de Mul, and Joost Raessens. The two works are then combined to inspect the narrative features of video games and analyze how specifically Computer Role-Playing Games (CRPGs for short) deal with story representation and space exploration. This is accomplished by relying on Espen J. Aarseth's conceptions of ergodicity, hypertext, and cybertext in his work *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. Furthermore, the

properties of CRPGs as digital successors of Gary Gygax' and Dave Arneson's tabletop role-playing game *Dungeons and Dragons* are addressed by way of Jennifer Grouling Cover in her work *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-Playing Games*. After having investigated the structuring principles on the example of CRPGs, this paper turns to the ideas of immersion and simulation as analyzed by Janet H. Murray in *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. How ludic and narrative elements combine in order to make CRPGs function is exemplified by way of Black Isle Studios and BioWare's *Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn* and *Dragon Age: Origins*.

The established body of theory serves the purpose of organizing a framework for the analysis of specific mechanisms which adjust narrative features to the ergodic[1] space of video games. As it is demonstrated by way of Chatman, narrative is mainly a linear construct which exerts its own rules of assembly. In traditional platforms of narrative expression, events are strung together in order to formulate a story. Moreover, the angle from which the author allows the reader to observe the sequence of events is encompassed by discourse. In addition to that, events can be narrated by way of diegesis or showcased through mimesis. As argued in the paper, video games are not narratives in themselves but possess certain levels of narrativity. As such, they modify the existing narrative tools in order to convey a story in a digitally simulated environment. Aarseth proposes intrigue as the main mechanism for traversing the game-space in which the player participates in the fabrication of a story. The multiplicity of choice and the bifurcating potential of the ludic narrative are encapsulated by the dynamic character of CRPGs in the form of a labyrinth. Suspended between the narrative and ludic aspects of the game is player agency with ostensibly liberating properties of ergodic maneuvering. Following the principles of intrigue, the player traverses the digital landscape/labyrinth of a fictional world with the purpose of disentangling the overarching mystery of the game. Prior to setting off on the ludic journey, players create their avatars in the character creation segment of the game in which they choose their character's appearance and abilities. This customized, digital figure behind the screen represents a virtual extension of oneself imbued with supernatural features. By way of their avatars, the players navigate the simulated environment and follow the narrative path from one significant event to another. The hero's journey is transfixed between two dimensions of exploration as they attempt to solve the main puzzle of the game - geographic and narrative. Mirroring a detective story, the player goes from one location to the next, trying to disclose the malady that plagues the land or uncover and defeat the antagonist of the storyline.

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[1]A term denoting "nontrivial effort (used) to allow the reader to traverse the text" (Aarseth 1).

Therefore, the driving force of the protagonist's journey is the desire for the resolution of the labyrinthine plot. In their adventure, players encounter other non-player characters (NPCs) who either join them on their quest or provide them with clues vital for the continuation of the storyline.

These mechanisms on which CRPGs operate reflect the fundamental cultural patterns of the United States as encompassed by the paradigms standardized in American Studies. The cultural myths embedded in the consciousness of the American nation pour out from their psychic enclosures in the shape of works of art, public speeches, sermons, letters, and so on (Klein). Based on these, scholars recognize and extract the symbolic images in order to study the ways in which a nation perceives itself. These images carry narrative value on their own and evolve along with the society from which they emerge. CRPGs represent one such stage in the evolution or adaptation of cultural patterns to the popular form of entertainment. The inherent structure of CRPGs embodies the myths of the American nation both in its narrative and ludic respects. The monomythic journey of the player character on a quest is sustained by the same driving force of Perry Miller's errand into the wilderness, while the innocence of the heroic figure in the ergodic space emanates with the features of R.W.B. Lewis' American Adam. CRPGs, therefore, represent the extension of culturally rooted values which promote fundamental ideas of the identity of the American nation. The tools used in the practice of conveying cultural images by way of literature can also be employed in the critical reading of video games to yield the same results. As paradigms are both narrative and visual in structure it is safe to argue that the mode of their expression is perfectly sound in the form of video games. The experience of play bends the almost rigid and linear form of narrative but their synthesis in the shape of CRPGs results in the opening of new platforms for the enactment of cultural phenomena inherent to the idea of the American nation.

2. Narratology

Chatman distinguishes two main components imminent for narrative function: story and discourse (19). The story (*histoire*) encapsulates the sequence of events and its existents, i.e. characters – *what* is happening; while discourse (*discours*) embodies the expression of the former component, the means and the way by which it is depicted – *how* the thing that is happening is being relayed (Chatman 19). One of the key features of narrative is event sequencing, which entails a chain-like arrangement of actions (Chatman 21). In order to comprehend the sequence of events, the reader depends on them being linearly composed (Chatman 21). If one is to extract events and characters randomly, that extraction would bear little to no resemblance to a coherent narrative structure which in itself necessitates a "discernable organization" (Chatman 21). Furthermore, a narrative structure constitutes a dialogue, a channel of informational exchange between two, or sets of, participants, each with their own designated function (Chatman 28). In this process of communication, "what is communicated is *story*, the formal content element of narrative; and it is communicated by *discourse*, the formal expression element" (Chatman 31).

Chatman claims that the function of discourse is to express the core statements of a story – process and stasis (32). Process statements are characterized by a development of action which, speaking strictly in terms of physics, implies an exertion of force and an investment of energy. Linguistically, they are in the active voice or "in the mode of DO or HAPPEN" (Chatman 32). On the other hand, stasis statements occupy the position of passive voice and are "in the mode of IS," generally constituting denotative qualities of existents, i.e. characters. Furthermore, events can either be "logically essential" to the story, which would make them *kernels*, or arbitrary – *satellites* (Chatman 32). Additionally, events can either be *actions* or *happenings*, depending on the role of the character through which events are woven into a story (Chatman 32, 44). If a character is the agent, the event in question is an action, if he the action is being performed unto the character, the event is a happening (Chatman 32, 44). Whatever the case, the event, or a string of actions, is in some way or another presented to the audience. It is in this different way of presenting events that the main distinction between modes of narration is found. One the one hand, there is "narration proper" or the "recounting of an event" which was distinguished by Aristotle as *diegesis*; and on the other hand, there is "enactment" or "its unmediated presentation" – *mimesis* (Chatman 32). It is safe to generalize in arguing that there are prevalent modes of narration which are principally inclined to utilize either mimetic or

diegetic tools in fashioning the story. The modes in question are, of course, film and novel. Today, film has evolved into an entirely immersive medium with the purpose of projecting the visual content of a story to a passive audience. Such a format has often been accused of and criticized for creating a voyeuristic genre of entertainment where the viewer only enjoys the front value of the represented and portrayed actions (see, for instance Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen* XVI.3 (1975): 6–18.). That is, without being provided with the element of internal thought processes or emotional conflicts behind certain depicted actions of characters, the audience is left to their own devices in "reading out" this part of the narrative, which also depends on the actor's performance. The novel, on the other hand, innately depicts internal states, streams of consciousness or emotional conflicts, which is what gives it its richness of introspective immersion – that of not only ingesting the content of the storyline but also having an almost palpable sense of the character's journey as well as their experience of the same. Phrased differently, novels expect a different degree of engagement when it comes to unravelling the story by way of the narrative method. Film offers a continuous transmittance of content which allows for its uninterrupted intake and immediate processing of raw, visual information, whereas the novel calls for an additional stage in processing information. Video games fall somewhere between these two modes of narrativity, as both sets of tools are at their disposal when it comes to conveying a narrative experience. In developing his concept of *cybertext* and ergodic/nonergodic literature, Espen Aarseth explains this internal effort that is intrinsic to the process of reading. In his work *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, he describes the process of cognitive unpacking of textual information in literature by way of an engaged effort in the process of consuming narrative content. Aarseth claims that this process is "trivial, with no extranoematic[2] responsibilities placed on the reader except (for example) eye movement and the periodic or arbitrary turning of pages" (Aarseth 1-2). The "extranoematic" quality is crucial in distinguishing the kinds of narrative engagement and the interactivity between the content creator and the content consumer. Nevertheless, this stage of mediation, not present in film and yet so intrinsic to the novel form, entails internal reconstruction of an entire world and its physical laws, characters' behavior, facial expressions, movement, and even color, and sound. Therefore, seeing, i.e. viewing, entails effortless decoding of meaning depicted on the screen, whereas reading requires additional employment of energy in mentally reconstructing an image or a reality based on that which is written. Seeing how video games

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[2] From *noesis* - a purely intellectual apprehension; cognition especially when occurring through direct knowledge (*Merriam-Webster.com*).

employ both tactics in narrative conveyance, it is safe to argue, that they are a hybrid form in which the user experiences more than one complex way of narrative intake.

2.1. Events

In order for a story to transform into a plot, not only does it have to rely on discourse and the way events rely to each other, but there also has to exist a "logic of hierarchy" (Chatman 53). Chatman claims that "[i]n the classical narrative, only major events are part of the chain or armature of contingency," whereas "[m]inor event have a different structure" (1980:53). To reiterate, Chatman diff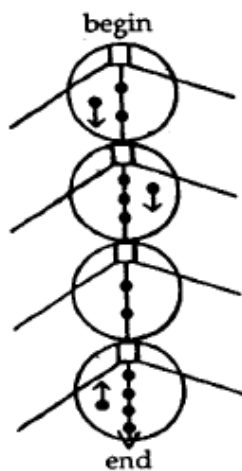erentiates two kinds of events regarding their narrative importance; *kernels*, which constitute the major cogwheels in the narrative mechanism, and *satellites* which are not crucial to the plot but their absence "impoverish[es] the narrative aesthetically" (Chatman 54). Moreover, *kernels* are "nodes or hinges in the structure, branching points which force a movement into one of two (or more) possible paths," their deletion destroys the narrative logic (Chatman 53). Chatman clarifies by relying on a diagram (see fig. 1), which employs basic objects used in analytic, or Cartesian, geometry. The kernels are represented by squares and satellites by dots, both of which can be found on a vertical line indicating "the main direction of the story-logic" (Chatman 55). The kernels and the satellites are enclosed by a larger circle which constitutes a "complete narrative block" out of which diagonal lines project outwards and "indicate possible but unfollowed narrative paths" (Chatman 55).

Figure 1: Kernel and satellite diagram; Seymour Chatman *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*

Apart from being attached to the main direction of the narrative which follows "the normal sequencing of the story," satellites can also be slightly more independent, still located within the circle but not connected to the main narrative line (Chatman 59). In that case, they are marked by additional arrowheads depending on the "anticipatory or retrospective" kernel they point to (Chatman 50).

3. Ludology

The overarching subject matter of the discussion revolves around a hybrid medium. Having covered the narrative part of theory in the previous section, this segment addresses the second component of this paper – play. Games have existed since before civilization, having a functional purpose in the psychological and physiological development of animals as well as within the genus of homo. Seeing how animals display playful behavior without having the ability to speak or commune via the medium of language, as we recognize it, it is logically sound to argue that play existed before any type of narrative. However, such a claim wrongly presupposes that the only way to convey a narrative is by way of the medium of language, which inadvertently disregards all other media capable of having a narrative structure (painting, dance, sculpture, etc.). What is more, making such an argument opens up a plethora of controversial concepts and theoretic disputes because of the abstractness of the issues in question. For example, is that to say that consciousness of a being in an advanced-enough evolutionary stage is capable of processing and differentiating notions of serious and non-serious activities? Do all games necessitate a structure of form in terms of rules and conditions, and by extension, does such order presuppose a type of narrative within the consciousness of a given advanced organism?

The subject matter of Huizinga's *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* revolves around a central argument that "culture and civilization 'arises *in* and *as* play, and never leaves it'" (Frissen et al. 10). The polemic issue about the recognition of play as an intrinsic part of life finds justification in the fact that Huizinga presented his ideas decades before there was even an inkling of the gaming industry's inception. However, seeing how technology and play are virtually inseparable in the current state of affairs, referring to Huizinga's *Homo ludens* presents itself as a drawback due to his polarization of the two concepts. Recognizing the issue of the oppositional placement of play and technology in Huizinga, Frissen et al. offer an updated view of ludology, appropriating it for theoretical use in the digitally transformed world. Claims that play is undeniably human, find their roots in the early modern period, namely in the Romantic movement (Frissen et al. 11). Considering Friedrich Schiller "the founding father of contemporary ludology", Frissen and her colleagues state his argument that "the play drive" is "the core of humanity since it enables man to reconcile necessity and freedom" (11). The increasing influence of play on culture reflected itself not only in the transformation of the "predominantly rationalistic and utilitarian ontology and

anthropology" in the humanities, but in the natural sciences as well, going as far as implementing "*game theory* in biology" and so on (Frissen et al. 12). Concepts such as "ludo-industry" and "ludo-capitalism" are becoming more mainstream as the "substantial growth of leisure time" and the "increased interest in play and games" progressively shape the reality of the 21st ct (Frissen et al. 12).

Building on the above-mentioned difference between serious and non-serious acts, Huizinga's view distinguishes play as a "free activity" from other ordinary activities, manifesting itself "quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious,' but at the same time *absorbing the player intensely and utterly*" (13; italics mine). Moreover, play "is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it," a claim not always holding true given the contemporary circumstances (Huizinga 13). In its purest form, yes, play does not seek any material gain other than the satisfaction it provides by itself. However, it appears that capitalist competition permeated even this pore of culture where competitive scenes are as numerous as the genres they spring out of, blurring the line between sport and unburdened playing. But where does one draw such a line? Clearly both forms fall under the concept of play and both unfold within their own "proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner" (Huizinga 13). Is one to conclude then that the difference depends solely on the outcome of the winner, i.e. on the form of the reward bestowed to them, being either material or of psychological nature? What is more, do all games and does all play necessitate a winner? A resolution to such an argument offers itself in Huizinga's claim which states that play "promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means" (13). This needs clarification since, by itself, such a statement is easily countered again by the form of sport play which thrives on publicity and relies on anything but concealment. For that reason, Huizinga distinguishes two forms of play: "the sacred performance and the festal contest," a distinction later on amplified by Roger Caillois (48).

3.1. Playful Elements

Building on Huizinga's preliminary definition, Frissen and her colleagues draw out six elements of Huizinga's definition of play. First, the basic feature of play is that is defined as a "voluntary activity" and its essence is expressed through the freedom of choice, i.e., regardless of instinct as an undefined quantity, "child and animal play because they enjoy playing, and therein precisely lies their freedom" (Huizinga 7-8). It is distinct from ordinary life and

"contains its own course and meaning" because it takes place "outside and above the necessities and seriousness of everyday life" (Huizinga 9, 26). Following that line of reasoning, Huizinga adds a spiritual note to the definition of play arguing that it is, in fact, a sacred activity, belonging "to the sphere of festival and ritual – the sacred sphere," which is why it is not only fun but, to a degree, "holy earnest" as well (Huizinga 9, 23). Second, Frissen et al. invoke the concept of suspension of disbelief wrapped in the willingness to participate and immerse oneself in the act of pretending. In that sense, Huizinga emphasizes the awareness of the distinction between play-pretend and real life, i.e. "consciousness that it is 'different' from 'ordinary life'," whereas Frissen et al. define playing as "only acting *as if* pretending" (Huizinga 28); (Frissen et al. 14). This kind of doubling down twice removes the act of playing from reality in that it means one only acts as if they pretend a certain *scenario* they are involved in is real. The third element of Huizinga's definition of play revolves around the emotional or psychological effects play has on the player. As Frissen et al. via Huizinga state, "play is not only immersive in the sense that it is absorbing the player intensely" participating in the act of playing is "accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy (…) of rapture and enthusiasm" (Frissen et al. 14); (Huizinga 28, 132). In other words, the "feeling of exaltation and tension accompanies the action, mirth and relaxation follow" (Huizinga, 1949: 132). The fourth element regards the property of cyclicality of gameplay within the dimension of time and space. Frissen and her colleagues claim that play "is characterized by specific *limits of time and space*," a temporal and spatial "*magic circle*" which allows it to be repeated any number of times (14). Huizinga claims that such a "faculty of repetition" is one of "the most essential qualities of play" (10). Fifth, the principal tools that allow play to be sequestered from the fabric of reality are its rules. "They are absolutely binding" and "determine what 'holds' in the temporary world circumscribed by play" (Huizinga 11). Lastly, this rule imposed compliance introduces or temporarily creates order, i.e. it "brings a temporary" and "limited perfection" to "an imperfect world" dictated by "the confusion of life" (Huizinga 10).

Having met with not yet clarified distinctions as serious versus non-serious and sport versus leisure play, it becomes clear that there is more to play in terms of category than the simple polarized division Huizinga came up with. In his "critical elaboration of Huizinga's work, Roger Caillois presents a typology consisting of four categories" (Frissen et al. 14). First and foremost, before elaborating on the additional two types, Caillois renames Huizinga's "sacred performance" as simple simulation or *mimicry* which ranges from "children's imitation play to theater," and "festal contest" as competition or *agôn* "referring to free play, regulated

sports, contests, and so on (Frissen et al. 14). To these he adds "chance" play or "*alea*" which includes "counting-out rhymes and lotteries" and "vertigo" – "*ilinx*, ranging from merry-go-round 'whirling' to mountain climbing" (Frissen et al. 15). Caillois' categories may seem too broad for today's specifically diversified standards, seeing how they encompass a great deal of genres, but they are instructive in that they serve as great guidelines for navigation in the medium of video games which more often than not incorporates all four types in one product. In addition to the four-way distinction, Caillois also "discerns two play attitudes: *paidia* and *ludus*" (Frissen et al. 15). The former "refers to 'free play', improvisation, carefree gaiety and laughter, and spontaneous, impulsive, joyous, and uncontrolled fantasy," whereas the latter "disciplines and enriches *paidia*, since it refers to 'gaming', more explicitly rule-governed forms of play that often involve specific skills and mastery" (Frissen et al. 15). Having this elaboration in mind, it is not as taxing to situate *agôn* and *alea* closer to the pole of *ludus,* while noticing that *ilinx* and *mimicry* belong closer to the *paidia* end of the spectrum (Frissen et al. 15).

4. CRPG Characteristics

An investigation into the copula of ludology and narratology points to the issue of extensiveness in the possible manifestations of such a hybrid medium. To avoid confusion, and to isolate the instance of ludic narrative content, this paper turns to the analysis of the specific type of video game medium in question. Namely, the Role-Playing Game (RPG) genre in its computerized version, the CRPG. CRPGs owe their current success to their analog predecessor, Tabletop Role-Playing Game (TRPG) and its best-known representative in the mass-consumerist context, *Dungeons & Dragons* (Cover). In her work, *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-Playing Games*, Jennifer Grouling Cover offers a "brief introduction" to what constitutes a TRPG, so, in order to avoid further entanglement in trying to describe its elements, her account is employed instead:

> "As suggested by the name, TRPGs are played face-to-face (around a table, most likely), and involve players "acting out" a role. This acting is not always literal. Players do not arrive in costume or speak exclusively in-character—something that differentiates TRPGs from live-action role-playing games (LARPs). Instead, players develop characters based on certain rules and are responsible for deciding what those characters do over the course of the game. The DM, or dungeon master— now called the gamemaster (GM) in some TRPGs—develops a setting where the game takes place, a basic storyline, and any characters not being represented by the players of the game. The DM presents the players with situations, such as the one above, and asks the players, "What do you do?" at which point the players offer up actions for their characters. Many of these situations, referred to as encounters, involve fighting a monster or an evil villain. Most TRPGs also involve rolling dice to see whether certain actions succeed, and some involve positioning miniature figures on a battle map" (6)

The history of TRPGs begins with the "release of *Dungeons and Dragons* in 1974" by Dave Arneson and Gary Gygax (Cover 8, 9). Arneson, "a fan of *The Lord of the Rings* fantasy novels, introduced Tolkien-like fantasy elements into his war games," even though denying "the direct influence of Tolkien's work" later on (Cover 8). In addition to that, Arneson also "shifted the focus from controlling entire armies to controlling a single character," which situates *D&D* at the intersection of "two different traditions: a gaming tradition and a literary tradition" (Cover 8). In that sense, the antecedent genres to the TRPG and video game RPG, are both "war-gaming and fantasy novels" (Cover 8). The controllable single characters in the *D&D* world are divided according to class and race which means that a player can fabricate a

character alter-ego (Cover 8). Undeniably drawing inspiration from the fantastic realm, very much alike to Tolkien's Middle-earth, Arnesen significantly changes the existing "relationship between gaming and literature" (Cover 8). Seeing how "*characters* are present in nearly every kind of narrative," Cover comes to the conclusion that from that "definition alone, we can see that TRPGs overlap with several different categories, including both narrative and game" (11). In the character creation segment of *Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn* the player builds their character, choosing the heroic features that will enable them to set off on their monomythic[3] journey and traverse the treacherous landscape of Faerûn (the continent in the possible planet of Toril hosted by one of the realities established within the *D&D* universe). The identity of the player/character is divided into functional sections to accommodate the rules of the game and logical context of the possible world. The player chooses from voice to character portrait which will serve as manners of representation, an avatar, within the game. They choose their gender, race (human, elf, half-elf, gnome, halfling, dwarfs, half-orc), class (fighter, ranger, paladin, cleric, druid, mage, thief, bard, sorcerer, monk, and shaman), alignment[4], abilities (strength, dexterity, constitution, intelligence, wisdom, charisma), and skills (e.g. weapon proficiencies, lock picking, stealth, etc.). The identity of the player/character is divided into functional sections to accommodate the rules of the game and the logical context of the possible world. Each of these sections endow the player with particular abilities intrinsic to their own category which means that the identity of the player's character is similar to a jigsaw puzzle. Having established a desirable combination of traits and constructed a character, the player truly begins with the experience of play from the isometric graphical perspective of the environment where three-dimensional objects are projected on a two-dimensional plane. The player occupies a position of a doll-house orchestrator, observing and controlling the puppets with all the Machiavellian insinuations such a perspective offers. To a certain degree this point of view distances the player from the kind of immersion first-person role-playing games offer. On the other side, the isometric point of view caters to the strategic elements of the game allowing the player to assume more control over the environment and the positioning of their party of characters.

D&D being the predecessor of the CRPG genre is an undeniable statement; however, the reason for its invocation is not to simply delineate genre but to justify the course of

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[3] Discussed in more detail in the later part of the paper.
[4] A spectrum of morality and ethics ranging from good to evil with subsidiary demarcations of lawful, neutral or chaotic; influence dialogue options and provide the player with the role-play element.

theoretical argumentation. As already mentioned by Cover, *D&D* is a form of interactive fiction in narrative terms, while in ludic – a TRPG (2010). Both Espen J. Aarseth and Cover analyze the narrative structure of interactive fiction in their respective ludic media of interest, Cover in terms of TRPG and Aarseth in terms of cybertext. Aarseth's point of interest (text adventure game) is essentially a primitive model of a CRPG. The legitimacy of this claim surfaces when one observes the evolution of *D&D* and takes into account the ludic and narrative characteristics of its multimedia descendants. Stitching together Aarseth's and Cover's accounts on the progression of interactive fiction may legitimize the path of argumentation taking place in the following chapter. Aarseth's conceptualization of narratology within the spheres of computer technology and interactive fiction represents a crucial element in understanding the narrative framework of CRPGs. Carrying over the element of chance via dice from war games to *D&D*, Arnesen and Gygax cater to the *alea* (chance) characteristic of play as delineated by Frissen et al. This observation begs the question of the applicability of the remainder of play characteristics on the example of TRPGs and their computerized counterparts. Placing oneself in a role of a fictional character, operating and existing within a fictional world explicitly reflects the *mimicry* (role-playing) characteristic of play. *Agôn* (competition) constitutes the combative element of the game, whereas *ilinx* (vertigo) the thrill of exploration, the danger just beyond the corner, and the survival it brings into question. Cover claims that "perhaps one of the most significant advances that *D&D* made possible was a reimagining of the ways that stories and games interact" (9). In the continuation of Cover's analysis of TRPGs, she attests to an important characteristic of games in general, which forefronts their underlying *agôn* (competition) characteristic (11). She draws attention to the fact that almost "every game, whether computerized or not, can be considered a system that uses rules" (11). With that in mind, Cover introduces Andrew Rilstone's vision of TRPG, who implements the concept of the referee instead of a DM or a GM (12). Rilstone maintains that a TRPG is "a formalized verbal interaction between a referee and a player or players, with the intention of producing a narrative" (qtd. in Cover 12). A DM, or a referee in this case, ensures that certain game rules are being followed, which covers the *agôn* (competition) characteristic of play in the sense that the game is in fact regulated. Furthermore, dungeon monsters represent obstacles which, when eliminated, allow for the player/character to reach certain rewards and gratification. Although figuratively, i.e. entirely imaginative, the monsters represent the enemy who sometimes needs to be outsmarted and represents a piece in the puzzle-solving structure of the game. The GM represents the opposing entity against which, or in cooperation with, the character is forced to negotiate in order to achieve a satisfactory resolution of the narrative, that is, to "beat" the game.

Taking all these elements into account, it can be argued that TRPGs and their digital successors possess inherent structural elements which give them a competitive quality.

5. A Path to Narrative: Ergodicity, Cybertext, Interactive Fiction

According to Frissen et al., one of the main characteristics of play facilitated by the digital media is its *interactivity* (22). Cover, by way of Jay David Bolter and Damien Katz, evokes the issue of the constrictiveness of the print media, highlighting the frustration of choice it causes with Jorge Luis Borges' "Garden of Forking Paths" (21). Chatman employs Borges' short story to illustrate the linear structure of narrative and what happens when it is thwarted. The premise of the classical structure of narrative is its "network (or 'enchainment') of kernels [which] afford avenues of choice only one of which is possible" (Chatman 56). In other words, such narrative logic implies "that one thing leads to one and only one other, the second to a third and so on to the finale" and it is precisely this kind of framework that Borges' short story calls into question (Chatman 57). Chatman calls this Borges' type of narrative, "*antistory*" or "antinarrative" which "may be defined as an attack on this convention which treats all choices as equally valid" (56). In his short story, Borges eliminates the linear framework of classical narrative by making every possible choice (represented by an event/kernel) simultaneously unravel at once which steers his work into the depths of quantum physics, alternate realities and timelines, and the endlessness of the universe. Nevertheless, this kind of "antinarrative" opens up a whole field of inquiry for those narratives that have the ability to represent the subsequence of action and choice. From their elementary and largely one-sided versions of pick-a-path novels, to the elaborately negotiable TRPGs and the similar, Cover explains the constitution of interactive fiction heavily relying on Espen J. Aarseth's delineation of ergodic literature. Cover asserts that the term "*interactive fiction* has been used to refer to a variety of texts from more standard literary works with interactive qualities, to hypertext, to adventure games, to role-playing games" (22). "Although," she continues, "all fiction requires some participation of readers as they form the story in their minds," referring in that way to what has been analyzed by Chatman, "interactive fiction is more actively produced or navigated by the audience" (Cover 22). Aarseth's theory of ergodic literature and cybertext offers itself as a natural connective tissue between the three kinds of media of narrative content consumption. He introduces three key concepts by way of which he delineates the framework of interactive fiction: ergodic literature, hypertext, and cybertext. Ergodic literature refers to the type of narrative which requires investment of nonlinear effort in its consumption (nonlinear here meaning the transformation of the classical consumer-provider relationship, i.e. reader-author, viewer-filmmakers) (Aarseth, 1997). Aarseth coins the "phenomenon" by appropriating a term

"from physics that derives from the Greek words *ergon* and *hodos*, meaning 'work' and 'path'" (1). The phenomenon of ergodic literature requires "nontrivial effort (…) to allow the reader to traverse the text" (Aarseth 1). According to him, there is a certain angle of approach necessary to enjoy ergodic works of art. That is, "in a material sense" they have "certain requirements" intrinsically built in their structure that automatically help distinguish "between successful and unsuccessful users" (Aarseth 179). Moreover, Aarseth maintains that a "successful ergodic work of art maintains tension and excitement while providing a path for discovery, a coming into focus of a didactic of the design and hidden principles at work in the work" (179). It calls for hard work, nontrivial application of energy, instead of automatic action of adjustment to the medium, "something we have not been trained to do" (Aarseth 180). Cover, by way of Marie-Laure Ryan, explains that "ergodic texts create a feedback loop in which the user can go back and forth experiencing the story in a different sequence" (qtd. in Cover 22). The tool or medium allowing for that kind of interactivity is hypertext. Regarding ergodic literature, Ryan calls hypertext a "(sub)medium (…), an electronic tool for the organization of text" (qtd. in Cover 55). Today, hypertext is indispensable in navigating the Internet, so much so that it is taken for granted and rarely distinguished as a separate tool, which it essentially is. It disrupts the linearity of content intake by virtually enabling intramedial teleportation entirely arbitrarily, dependening on the choice of the user.

Aarseth considers cybertext to be the ergodic construct which applies the hypertext tool in the creation of narrative fiction with elements of play (1997). Whereas hypertext "is a useful term when applied to the structures of links and nodes", Aarseth suggests the implementation of *cybertext* "for texts that involve calculation in their production of scriptions" (75). Holding this view, he subscribes to the claim that hypertext is a device or, to its highest extent, a hyponym, enveloped by its hierarchically superior concept in the construction of which it is utilized. Furthermore, cybertext is a "neologism derived from Norbert Wiener's book (and discipline) called *Cybernetics*" and falls into the category of systems that contain "an information feedback loop" (Aarseth 1). Aarseth invests a lot of energy in delineating the term, providing contextual background via the history of the medium and applying the findings of his theoretical analysis on the examples of interactive fiction. Even though the focal point of Aarseth's work is on a predominantly textual narrative medium with elements of play, the in-depth analysis of his neologism is based on the argument that CRPG is virtually a cybertext medium with added dimensions of representation. Or, reversing the route of approach, a cybertext is inherently a game but not to the same extent as modern digital media allow it to be.

Aarseth asserts that the focus of the concept is "on the mechanical organization of the text, by positing the intricacies of the medium as an integral part of the literary exchange" (Aarseth 1). As opposed to classical forms of narrative, cybertext heavily "centers attention on the consumer, or user, of the text, as a more integrated figure" in the consumer-provider relationship (Aarseth 1). The cybertextual process or narrative consumption presupposes an effectuated semiotic sequence by the user, "and this selective movement is a work of physical construction that the various concepts of 'reading' do not account for," as already mentioned above (Aarseth 1). "A cybertext is a machine for the production of variety of expression", it is "the wide range (or perspective) of possible textualities seen as a typology of machines" (Aarseth 3, 22). In it, the relationship between consumer-producer is most accentuated since it "shifts the focus from the traditional threesome of author/sender, text/message, and reader/receiver to the cybernetic intercourse between the various part(icipant)s in the textual machine" (Aarseth 22).

6. Intrigue: A Means for Traversing the Cybertext

Aarseth applies his theory of the cybertext on the example and logic of the textual adventure game. He begins by drawing out the misconception of the role of the user in the unravelling of the hypertext narrative as the filler of the semantic gaps provided by the text (Aarseth 110). Such a view of the player relies on Wolfgang Iser's idea or literary *leerstellen* – semantic blanks or gaps which are to be filled in by the reader to bring "the literary work into existence" (qtd. in Aarseth 110). In literature, the production of the story relies on the enrichment of the literary work by the reader's interaction with the plot (Aarseth 111). The adventure game necessitates the narrowing down of the plot by "a designifying of the gaps" which is "far from moving toward a story by means of a plot with significant gaps" (Aarseth 111). "From many potential stories, a single plot is extracted (if the player is successful)" (Aarseth 112). Continuing his narrative deconstruction of the adventure game, Aarseth states that the "concept of plot is unsettled by the reader (user), who, being strategically within it, is in no position to see through it and glimpse a story behind" (112). Because of that phenomenon it appears as if the functions of plot and story have traded places when in fact it is not the case (Aarseth 112). Based on the frequent argument that plot of literary fiction is "only discovered or reconstructed by the reader after the end is reached," Aarseth is forced to deflect the claim that there is "no great difference between the narrative and the ergodic situation as far as plot is concerned" (12). The reason for that dispute is in the sense of security a reader has that all the events they encounter will in the end make sense, whereas the player cannot rely on that same assumption because there is no guarantee that the events they perform "are at all relevant to the solution of the game" (Aarseth 112). Moreover, Aarseth argues that adventure game "effectively disintegrates any notion of story by forcing the player's attention on the elusive 'plot'" (12). "Instead of a narrated plot", he continues, "cybertext produces a sequence of oscillating activities effectuated (but certainly not controlled) by the user" (Aarseth 112). However, there is "a structuring element in these texts, which in some way does the controlling or at least motivates it" (Aarseth, 112) That element Aarseth calls *intrigue* to suggest "a secret plot in which the user is the innocent, but voluntary, target (…) with an outcome that is not yet decided – or rather with several possible outcomes that depend on various factors" like the player's experience or creativity (112). He borrows the term from drama theory where it "takes place on a diegetic, intrafictional level as a plot within the plot and, usually, with the audience's full knowledge", whereas "ergodic intrigue is directed against the user" (Aarseth 113). Moreover, "ergodic intrigue must have more than one explicit outcome and cannot, therefore,

be successful or unsuccessful" (Aarseth 113). By way of intrigue, Aarseth readjusts narrative theory to fit its ludic implications while heavily relying on Genette and Chatman. He equates his concept of intrigue to that of story as described by Chatman, the *what* of narrative object, rather than the *how*, i.e. discourse (114).

The events and existents of a story are undeniably present in intrigue but they are not sewn together linearly "in a fixed sequence" (Aarseth 114). Instead of the linear structure of the event dimension found in a novel or a film, adventure game's and cybertext's intrigue consist of a "multidimensional event space and unfolds through the negotiation of this space by text and user" (Aarseth 114). The unfolding of these events presents itself in the manner of a log, "a recording of a series of experienced events" which is a notion implemented in CRPGs as one of the constitutive elements of tracking a storyline (Aarseth 114). The literary experience is thus reconfigured by cybertext "along the different plane than the narrative" (Aarseth 114). Instead of having narrative consisting of story and plot, Aarseth proposes "intrigue-oriented ergodic log," i.e. "ergodic discourse" (114). The narrate – character "in the world of the work" to whom the narrator is speaking – in the communication chain of the classical narrative forms is paralleled with an *intriguee*, the implied reader as held by Chatman, in the cybertext medium (Chatman 150). The positions of a narrator, narratee, and the main character collapse in the adventure game as "the user assumes the role of the main character and, therefore, will not come to see this person as another (…) rather as a remote-controlled extension of herself" (Aarseth 113). Furthermore, Aarseth elaborates on this "epistemological hierarchy" by way of player character death (113). The player character construction represents a symbiotic relationship of the person and its reflection in the realm of fiction, or, following Aarseth, a projection of oneself from the real world into the world of the narrative of the interactive fiction. When the main character dies, the player is offered with a proposition to learn from that experience and begin anew until they decide to end the play. This type of narrative involvement is simply "denied to the narratee" of the classical narrative modes (Aarseth 113). Analogous to the narrator, the intrigue of cybertext has an intrigant and between the intrigant and the intriguee Aarseth places "the game's voice, the simulated correspondent that relates events to the implied user" (114). The game's voice is not functionally the same as various other types of narrators in narrative fiction, since the ergodic voice is characterized more as a negotiator and less a mechanical construct that tells the tale (Aarseth 114). Aarseth equates the intrigant, "as the architect of the intrigue," to the implied author, "the mastermind who is ultimately responsible

for events and existents but who is not motivated by a particular outcome" (114). The game's voice assumes the position similar to, if not the same as, a GM or a DM in the traditional TRPG.

7. Simulation: Cybertext Applied

From what has been discussed so far, it is certain that CRPGs are situated between two opposing fields of theory, ludology and narratology. Video games have been developing and evolving regardless of the position in the theoretic crossfire they inadvertently occupy. Narratologists vest in their belief that narrative content is meant to be unyielding in its structure. On the other hand, ludologists reject any attempt at the reconciliation between the two. Instead, they argue for a purist approach in the analysis of the medium all the while accusing narrative investigations in the same (like Aarseth's) to be "theoretical colonialism" (Jones 20). Whatever the argument for approaching the medium, it is undeniable that games, namely CRPGs, possess a narrative aspect. On the very basic level, there is a storyline, a set of events, that the player experiences and it is on that experience of the game that Dave Jones places value. In his article "Narrative Reformulated: Storytelling in Videogames," Jones argues that games, of whichever genre and form, are "cultural artifacts utilized to deploy, construct, deconstruct, reconstruct, interpret, reinterpret, explode, implode, transmit, translate, or retranslate some potentially meaningful experience" (20). Jesper Juul argues that "there is no such thing as a continuously interactive story", which Jones proclaims "shortsighted" while at the same time presuming that "narrative must always be a static artifact" (Juuls qtd. in Jones 20). Jones offers a reconciliatory approach to videogames which also allows narrative to "conceptually evolve" and leave its outdated husk that dictates its inert stasis of always having to "look back at past events" (20). The statement that "the experience of playing games can never be simply reduced to the experience of a story" greatly alludes to Aarseth's ergodic structure of cybertext and also highlights the innate difference in the subject that enjoys the narrative content (reader, spectator) (qtd. in Jones 20). Jones follows Aarseth's line of argumentation in claiming that "gamers are at least as important to the narrative formula as the architect of the artifact in which we find the narrative" (21). He bases his claim on the observation that the study of video games so far has privileged "the activities and aspirations of the storyteller," while virtually neglecting a formulation of the end-user – the reader, the viewer, or the gamer – and their experience (Jones 21). Jones recognizes this phenomenon as a "paradigm shift" deserving of analysis in how these new story-fashioning mechanisms accommodate the "recently recognized entity: the gamer" (21). As described before, basic narrative structure consists of the story aspect (events) and the way they are presented to the reader, i.e. the discourse aspect (Chatman). The recounting of events, or narration proper, constitutes diegesis, while attempting to represent the events without mediation by way of "dialogue, monologue, or direct speech" denotes mimesis

(Rimmon-Kenan 107). Video games have additional planes of content transmission, namely visual representation, which makes the threading of the theoretic narrative structure of the medium that more difficult. They are multi-mediatory and, because of that, they have all the freedom of narrative conveyance their developers desire. However, in exchange for visual representation, video game narratives sacrifice the limitlessness of reconstruction of the story world within the imagination of their users. At certain points, video games may simulate a narrator reading a chapter from a book, at others they can progress through the narrative timeline by way of cut-scenes or character dialogue. Bearing that in mind, it seems that shifting between mimesis and diegesis is as inherent to the medium as it is arbitrary, and with the added player agency to influence the development of narrative, the complex nature and the difficulty of analysis only enhance.

Aarseth and Jones argue that the ludic counterpart to narrative discourse is simulation – "game space" as Jones calls it (Jones 21). Aarseth's basic premise is that "simulation is the hermeneutic Other of narratives; the alternative mode of discourse, bottom-up and emergent where stories are top-down and preplanned" (qtd. in Jones 21). Jannet Murray, both a proponent of literature and an apologist for new media expressions of narrative, found herself on the "optimistic" side of the cultural/theoretic divide of the 90s (10). In her book *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* she recognizes the opportunities the new expressive media offer for the manifestation of narrative. She considers the computer, not exclusively video games per se, to be a "marvelous" (in Todorov's terms) piece of technology which "offers a powerful new set of expressive affordances for the ancient human activity of storytelling" (Murray 17). For the subject matter of her book, Murray posits the idea of "computation as a narrative medium" (18).

In his 2001 online article, Gonzalo Frasca considers games "ontologically different from narrative because they are not just based on representation", arguing for their reliance on "simulation, which is a way of portraying reality that essentially differs from narrative" (Frasca, "Simulation 101: Simulation versus Representation"). Painting, literature, and film depend on representation when it comes to narrative expression which in their case is "never exhaustive" and always incomplete because there "will always be some characteristics that will not fit" into their medium (Frasca). Simulation, on the other hand, is "shown through a model" in which it is expected of a user to perform an action and witness an outcome in the said model (Frasca). However, "simulation itself is something bigger than narrative" (Frasca). "It is a dynamic system that yes, contains thousands of potential 'stories', but it is larger than the sum

of its parts" (Frasca). This argument points to the resolution of the narrative-game debate by way of the concept of emergence. In his article "Emergence, game rules and players," Faltin Karlsen, from the University of Oslo, analyzes the concept of emergence from different standpoints. He claims that it is a term "often used within a larger theoretical framework" and exemplifies his argument via the field of complexity theory within which emergence "is regarded as a fundamental quality of systems" (Karlsen 2). Emergence is viable in both social and natural sciences, and in terms of it connoting an entity greater than the sum of its components, Karlsen argues not with but against such fathoming. According to Juul "emergence is a game structure comprising simple rules that, when combined, give a higher number of possible outcomes and consequently complex game play" (Karlsen 5). The emergent nature of a video game, as Jones claims, is in the ostensible quality it possesses to offer the player a safe ergodic space to explore and witness the outcomes of seemingly indefinite possibilities of their actions (31). However, the boundlessness of choice is simply an illusion bracketed between the code set by the game designers (Jones). In other words, "if the code of a game does not account for my desire to do a certain action, I simply cannot do that action," no matter how much freedom of exploration is given to the player as the medium and the technology it is supported by evolve (Jones 26). In light of what has been argued, emergence and simulation combine into a particular bond in the video game medium which reflects the potential of computer technology Murray represents. Video game emergence is determined by a combination of factors: rules (both of the game itself and the genre in which they operate), limitations (code, computer memory), and player agency or choice of action. Simulation, then, represents a system in which such emergence is embodied and manifested. It holds the potential for narrative, yet it would be inadequate to place it solely in a narrative category. Or as Frasca states: "In the same way that a kaleidoscope should not be understood as a collection of possible images but instead as a device that produces images according to certain mechanics" ("Simulation 101: Simulation versus Representation"). Simulation in video games allows the player to experience the events as "personal experience," rather than feeling like they are "being told a story by a narrator" despite there being obvious narrative tools employed in the construction of the simulation (Frasca). Eliminating the idea of simulation being a version of an interactive narrative, Frasca claims that it "is act of modeling a system A by a less complex system B, which retains some of A's original behavior" ("Simulation 101: Simulation versus Representation).

This points to what Aarseth and Jones claim that video games, in this case simulation, operate in a top-down, whereas narrative in a bottom-up sequence (Frasca). In his own words:

> "Usually, narrative works in a bottom-up sequence: it describes a particular event from which we can generalize and infer rules (this is why narrative is used so much in education). On the other hand, simulation is usually top-down: it focuses on general rules, which then we can apply to particular cases (this is why simulation also works great as a tool for teaching complex rules because, unlike narrative, it allows **experimentation**)" (Frasca; emphasis mine).

The theoretical analysis of both terms, emergence and simulation, points to how easy it is to conflate their implications. Both are systems and both operate on sets of rules, however, simulation imposes itself as a "parent" system which, in the video game medium, allows for emergence to fully manifest itself by way of player agency. On that note, Murray considers video games as a "system-modeling medium" used to represent "profoundly important aspects of our lives" as it is increasingly being observed through this systemic prism (89). That is, by way of T. S. Elliot's term of objective correlative ("in which clusters of events in literary works can capture emotional experience"), Murray claims that video games can be utilized as tools "for thinking about the many systems we participate in" (89). To that extent, video games, then, are "organized rule systems" which use simulation as the main avenue of expression and interaction (Murray 89).

8. Immersion

Jones and Aarseth support the idea that the new expressive media, which meander between traditional conceptions of game and narrative, require unique methodology. They propose a new line of investigation that rejects almost ritualistic neglect of any narrative modes that dare stray away from the well-trodden path set by structuralist theory. The shift of focus they advocate lies in the naturally arising concept intrinsic to the medium – agency – which revolves entirely around the player. Again, not to be confused with interactivity, agency allows players to, "in a sense, leave a mark on the storyworld by creating their own character (…) which is productive, rather than selective interactivity" (Cover 46).

The manner of fashioning fictional geography is nothing short of a game of make-believe or simply one of the facets of imagination. The author thinks of a fictional reality and endows it with properties they see fit. The way natural laws and logical systems are upheld in that reality relies on the rules set by the author of the world itself, which means they are entirely arbitrary. This mechanism is encapsulated by the possible-worlds theory which "originally comes from philosophy and logic" and helps one logically think of a world with a property of any kind not present or simply not occurring in the known reality (Cover 89). The possible-worlds theory helps "logically explain the truth within fictional worlds" by way of comparison with "our own actual world" (Cover 89). The inherent logic of the storyworld is recognized as feasible in that world alone through the instance of willing suspension of disbelief and a desire to participate. The "possible-world theory accounts for the idea of truth in fictional stories" (Cover 89).

This brings to the fore the idea of space exploration and how it relates to narrative in ergodic terms. Unlike in TRPGs, space in CRPGs is finite and it "must be laid out and programmed in advance" (Cover 47). "Even games with randomly created spaces already have coded in them the types of spaces and items that will appear in those spaces" (Cover 47). Moreover, most games simply have inaccessible spaces, "spots where the user simply can't click to go any farther" (Cover 47). Usually, video games have "areas of the map that don't open up until the player has completed certain quests or levels" and in "some CRPGs, a player might even find the location of another area of the map, but if he or she attempts to go there too soon, chances for survival aren't good" (Cover 47).

What video games hold in common with other narrative media is the exploitation of human inclination towards tuning "into stories with an intensity that can obliterate the world around us" (Murray 98). Murray alludes to Plato's distrust of the poet by claiming that a "stirring narrative in any medium can be experienced as a virtual reality" (98). To further that argument, she relies on the example of Don Quixote and the "siren power of narrative" which, despite the lack of simulation technology, has the ability to conjure worlds "more real than reality" (Murray 98). Make-believe child games, fantasies and daydreams all stem from the "age-old desire to live out a fantasy aroused by a fictional world," and for the first time they have been made tangible with video games (Murray 99). They intensify the experience by allowing participation in an environment fashioned with "encyclopedic detail and navigable spaces" where the "computer can provide a specific location for places" one longs to visit (Murray 99). Murray defines immersion in terms of metaphor for the experience of being submerged in water which correlates to "the experience of being transported to an elaborately simulated place" (99). More specifically:

> "We seek the same feeling from a psychologically immersive experience that we do from a plunge in the ocean or swimming pool: the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality, as different as water is from air, that takes over all of our attention, our whole perceptual apparatus. We enjoy the movement out of our familiar world, the feeling of alertness that comes from being in this new place, and the delight that comes from learning to move within it. […] But in a participatory medium, immersion implies learning to swim, to do the things that the new environment makes possible. This chapter is about such digital swimming, about the enjoyment of immersion as a participatory activity." (Murray 99).

In this sense, Murray views the computer as "an extension of our own consciousness" which reacts to our input and displays that reaction in the shape of simulation (99). Yet the computer monitor, the keyboard, and the mouse used to participate in the displayed simulation are still within the purview of the player, very much like the reader is physically aware of the book he is reading. Until holodeck technology is invented, suspension of disbelief will be conceptually rooted in both the physical realm and the willing disregard of the reconstructive process of narrative. This physicality of objects that hold narrative value, or are used in its expression, Murray describes in terms of liminality. In order to sustain make-believe narratives fashioned in a child-like manner, one has to pretend that the object projecting that narrative is not there (100). In doing so, these objects fall into transitional places in the user's psyche that maintain the "liminal trance" of narrative experience which is fragile by nature and, therefore, requires

conventions to sustain it specific to every art form (Murray 100). A common term used in this context is the concept of the fourth wall. In order to "enter the fictional world" of a book, play, film, one follows conventional rules that leave their worlds undisrupted (Murray 102). But participatory narrative of video games necessitates the disruption of simulation, leaving a personal mark on the virtual world as if it were real. To engage with virtual worlds and narratives in CRPGs, Murray argues for a requirement of defining "the boundary conventions that will allow us to surrender to the enticements of the virtual environment" (102). "Once the illusory space is created, it has such psychological presence that it can almost divorce itself from the means of representation" (Murray 103).

The intrigue conception of the game persuades the player to explore its world in an endeavor to follow the narrative cues and solve the underlying mystery of the adventure. The player is inserted into the vast ergodic environment and left to their own devices to investigate every nook and cranny of the world if they so please. By way of navigation through the world, the player is supposed to construct their own vision of itself, its laws and principles, and the magic that holds it together. Regardless of the software and hardware that sustain the digital simulation of the world of the game, its portrayed properties are unbeknownst to the player until they set off on an explorative journey in which they will comprehend its machinations. The geomorphology of space is graspable only at the aesthetic and superficial level. The player may wander in wonder of the beauty of landscape they traverse intensified by the atmospheric music accompanying the game, but they cannot sample its physiology on a scientific level. It is a simulation of a fictional world still lagging behind the sophistication of the holodeck as portrayed in the *Star Trek* universe. The ambient music alludes to the player's aesthetic experience of the environment by stimulating and enhancing their emotional/psychological connection with the medium of narrative expression. The role of music occupies a paradoxical position of virtually enhancing the player's sense of immersion rather than dispersing its magic. The player's senses are galvanized by the ambient music, the purpose of which is to draw the player deeper into the digitalized simulation of the world. Every setting is followed by a different kind music, battles and dangerous places with exciting and face-paced notes with the intention to enhance the player's focus, whereas peaceful and unhazardous settings are accompanied by peaceful notes enticing the player to enjoy the wonders of the digitalized space. Aside from music, sound effects also sustain the sense of immersion by mimicking the acoustic properties of the actual world, e.g. sounds of steps, weapon clanking, or bird song.

9. Agency

Defined simply, "agency is the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices" (Murray 123). In RPGs there are undeniable similarities to theater when it comes to role immersion and playing the character. In video games, agency is much more than just participation or monitored activity, otherwise "offered to a limited degree in traditional art forms" (Muray 125). It is an "aesthetic pleasure" and "an experience to be savored for its own sake" intrinsic to the structure of games (125). A crucial form of agency for the development of narrative in CRPGs is spatial navigation (Murray). What Aarseth defines by way of ergodicity and intrigue, Murray applies on the video game medium.

Movement through hypertext and cybertext requires ergodic exploration of the literary space very much is the same in terms of navigation in CRPGs. As Murray argues, "the infinitely expandable space" of "electronic environments offer[s] the pleasure of orienteering in two very different configurations, each of which carries its own narrative power: the solvable maze and the tangled rhizome" (126). Thus, Murray alludes to what Aarseth already delineated when discussing ergodic literature. In exploring the cybertext game of *Zork,* he proposes "the idea of a narrative text as a labyrinth, a game, or an imaginary world, in which the reader can explore at will, get lost, discover secret paths, play around, follow the rules, and so on" (3). If Aarseth's description of ergodic literary forms is to be combined with simulation and emergence, it is safe to conclude that, inadvertently, Aarseth came to a very accurate portrayal of *D&D* based CRPGs with his idea of intrigue. The visit to a labyrinthine narrative open for exploration is then the narrative essence of a CRPG. Just like Aarseth who delineates between different types of labyrinths based on its legendary architect Dedalus, so too Murray observes the heroic implications such parallels invoke. Theseus as a mythical hero, Ariadne's thread as an enchanted artifact, and the legendary beast as the enemy inhabitant of the maze all point to the "heroic narrative of adventure" frequently drawn upon in the *D&D* universe (Murray 126). Murray explains the maze counterpart of the dyad in the following passage:

> "The adventure maze embodies a classic fairy-tale narrative of danger and salvation. Its lasting appeal as both a story and a game pattern derives from the melding of a cognitive problem (finding the path) with an emotionally symbolic pattern (facing what is frightening and unknown). (…) Like all fairy tales, the maze adventure is a story about survival. The maze is a road map for telling this story" (Murray 126).

However, the maze does not have to be "limited to such simplistic content or to an explicitly mazelike interface" it "could be a melodramatic adventure with complex social subtexts" (Murray 126). In addition to actual spatial twists it could also be a space of "moral and psychological choices" where "just as it is hard to see where a tangle of virtual corridors is leading, so too would it be hard to foresee the consequences of your actions and to determine what to value and whom to trust" (Murray 126). Therefore, to concept of the labyrinthine dungeon applies equally to spatial and social navigation of the digital expanse of the CRPG narrative. To advance through story of a game, reach narrative kernels, and "beat" the game itself does not necessarily imply eliminating all enemies until the player is the sole victor. The player also has to interact with other characters in the game's story (NPCs – non-player characters), negotiate with them and reach an understanding to resolve the crucial issue of the overarching quest/narrative. This kind of progression literally entails movement through space, navigation through digitally constructed simulation of the explorable universe to find a narrative resolution. The story is tied to space and vice versa, which is perhaps best described by Murray:

> "Whether an adventure maze is simple or complex, it is particularly suited to the digital environment because the story is tied to the navigation of space. As I move forward, I feel a sense of powerfulness, of significant action, that is tied to my pleasure in the unfolding story. In an adventure game this pleasure also feels like winning. But in a narrative experience not structured as a win-lose contest the movement forward has the feeling of enacting a meaningful experience both consciously chosen and surprising." (127).

The drawback of the maze structure of *D&D* based CRPGs is the same for any traditional narrative art form – finality (Murray 127). It has a "single solution," thus limiting player's options for progression and is debatably linear in structure. With all the freedom of exploration it offers, CRPG narrative is canalized and obstructed with a clear direction of flow, no matter the amount of permitted meandering. Therefore, agency in CRPGs might denote liberating characteristics but it is still pressured to follow the linear narrative path. Similar to reading a novel or watching a film, the kernels are set and the user follows the narrative chain of events. However, in video games, the player connects the chain links and paves the path themselves.

10.   Flows of Narrativity

By way of Ryan, Cover argues that there is a "difference between being a narrative and 'possessing narrativity'" (Ryan qtd. in Cover 75). Ryan ascertains that texts which "possess narrativity" are "produced with the intent to create a response involving the construction of a story," and according to Cover, RPG games especially fall into that category (qtd. in Cover 15). Adding to the discussion of navigation and the spatial stringing of events, Cover evokes Jenkins' idea of "spatial storytelling" in which he discerns the storyworld from the "actual telling of a narrative" (75). Jenkins claims that "storyworlds are created in games that either provoke previously known stories or provide the potential for creating new stories" (qtd. in Cover 75). In other words, video games are "spaces ripe with narrative possibility" (Jenkins qtd. in Cover 75). What is more, Ryan considers games "machines for generating stories" (qtd. in Cover 75). These analyses Cover instantiates point to the resolution of the debate "suggesting that games must be viewed either through a narratological or a spatial aesthetic," even more so "when we think of the way that spaces create the potential for narrative experience rather than sticking to a strict structural analysis of narrative forms" (Cover 75).

Video games are simulated spaces teeming with narrative opportunities that provide the player with an experience far more complex than the traditional way of "digesting" a narrative. They are ergodic traversable environments which rely on hermeneutic and proairetic mechanisms (discussed below) to imbue the ludic counterparts of the video game with captivating narrative elements and thus create an emergent ludo-narrativistic form of entertainment. These levels or frames of narrativity in CRPGs consist of multiple layers. First to be addressed is the element of narrativity in its purest form, i.e. what is generally considered narrative once extracted from the ludic structure it inhabits. The crucial concern is how the player encounters the events of the story and what is the discourse games rely on in depicting these story elements. It goes without saying that the basic dyad of narrative – story and discourse – applies to the CRPG genre regardless of the debate the medium is prone to. The structure of the story in a CRPG is as simple as in other narrative forms. There are kernels and satellites, basic and supplementary events the user pieces together as they move through the digital environment. What distorts the analytical framework is the notion of player agency, a role more active than that of the usual reader/spectator, yet not entirely liberated in narrative terms. The narrative plane of the CRPG necessitates the blind following of the kernels in the same linear fashion as employed in other media. The player is placed in a simulated reality in which the

basic premise of the game utilizes narrative cohesion and linearity that operates on the basic "if…then" logical connective. That is, *if* the player desires to uncover the ending of the story and, thus, finish the game, *then* they have to reach, follow, and complete/manifest, the fundamental kernels of the game's story.

A crucial method in infusing the labyrinth game with narrative fiction is "arousing and regulating the anxiety intrinsic to the form by harnessing it to the act of navigation" (Murray 129). That is to say, in addition to creating an engaging traversable landscape that will grasp the attention of the player on the level of adventure, excitement, and fun, there also needs to exist a narrative counterpart that will provide the game mode with meaning. CRPG's undeniably combine factors employed in creating literary narrative experience as well as bare ludic fun. "Suspense, fear of abandonment, fear of lurking attackers, and fear of loss of self in the undifferentiated mass are part of the emotional landscape of the shimmering web" (Murray 129). The make-believe part that is enhanced and caters to narrative fiction is the enchanting abilities a player is provided with in order to face the dangers of the Middle-earth-like world. *D&D* in both varieties, the TRPG and the CRPG, employs elements of journey stories and labyrinths, i.e. dungeon crawling. Murray is right to observe that the "navigational space of the computer also makes it particularly suitable for journey stories, which are related to mazes but offer additional opportunities for exercising agency" (Muray 131). She uses this opportunity to trace the history of journey stories from being orally conveyed to their modern implementations on multimedia devices. The very basic narrative formula of myths and legends with a protagonist setting off on a journey evolved from the simplest of fairy tales, to epic stories of heroic undertakings and sacrifice. Even before the mythological canon of Greece and Rome, there was *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, and after classical antiquity the many faces of heroes survived the Dark Ages. "Throughout the inhabited world, in all times and under every circumstance, the myths of man have flourished; and they have been the living inspiration of whatever else may have appeared out of the activities of the human body and mind" (Campbell 3). The myth of the hero is "a universal archetype recognizable across all the variations of culture, author, and medium" (Murray 131). In his book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces,* Joseph Campbell analyzes the hero's journey which, "after the invention of printing press" was "reinvented as the picaresque novel" – *Don Quixote, Huckleberry Finn*, etc., and then televised in various series (Murray 131). The millennia old presence of myths in culture point to the adamancy of its symbolic importance to humanity as it is cherished across multiple forms of media. The narrative value of myth transcends its form of expression as it is

continually adapted throughout human history and moved from one mode of expression to another, each jump symbolizing an upgrade in complexity and structure. Each mode of representation emphasized particular features of the journey in favor of others (Murray 131). For example, "moving the journey story from the fairy tale to the novel meant moving it from a symbolic realm of universal actors (a king, a wicked stepmother) to a particularized social world and a particular time and place" (131). When it comes to film, "the movies opened up the visual dimension of the archetype" as they "often emphasize exotic landscapes, foreign cultures, and the lure of open spaces" (Murray 131). Finally, reaching the computer, "the journey story emphasizes navigation – the transitions between different places, the arrivals and departures – and the how-to's of the hero's repeated escapes from danger" (Murray 131). Yet the essential structure of the myth, regardless of the medium by which it is conveyed, remains the same. In his work, Campbell epitomizes the "standard path of the mythological adventure" with the word "monomyth" – appropriated from Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (28). He summarizes the nucleus of the mythical journey in the following statement:

> "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man" (Campbell 28).

Virtually all heroes follow this pattern, Jason, Aeneas, Hercules, Prometheus, Gautama, Adam. (Campbell 28, 29). The heroes and the world setting that reflect that of Tolkien's works, and in turn *D&D*, are Beowulf and king Arthur with the atmosphere of the Nordic/Germanic folklore they inhabit. Demonstrative efforts to defend such a claim are not necessary in excessive measures, however, a brief substantiation is noticeable in basic observations of the hero inhabited worlds. Elves, orcs, dwarves, magic, and enchanted artifacts, serpents and dragons and other mythical beings, to the same or variable degree, roam the forests and other realms of Tolkien's Middle-earth and help fulfill the campaigns and raids of *D&D* sessions. In addition to that, the race and class systems of the game were directly influenced by Tolkien's vision of warriors, rangers, wizards, etc. The story of *The Lord of the Rings* is essentially a story about a hero's journey. As Beowulf and Arthur, and other heroes of different cultural backgrounds, are tasked with eliminating a threat in shape of a monster that plagues a community, or charged with retrieving an important artifact for the safety of the realm, so too are numerous heroes and heroines employed in the *D&D* universe. In fact, the basic premise of a *D&D* campaign is a scenario of a similar setting. The hero journeys to a monster infested mine to retrieve a stolen

item from the town's mayor or other notable citizen, or to an ancient temple, now hosting a malevolent cult that preys upon a nearby village. Whatever the story, the journey is essential. Resisting the urge to compare it to that of Frodo and the *Fellowship of the Ring* is counterintuitive for the implications it denotes. Murray's visit to a labyrinth crawling with enemies necessitates an overarching narrative that will further the experience of immersion and root it in something more than mindless enemy elimination. The "decisive victory is won" is what gives off a sense of accomplishment and gratification in shape of experience points and character skill progression (Campbell 28). Provided the agency of the player who follows the narrative kernels with intrigue being its guiding mechanism, CRPGs take form of an *errand*, a quest. The concept of the quest necessitates a journey for the resolution of the preliminary problem and, therefore, best reflects the heroic adventure narrative, i.e. monomyth. Murray argues that "computer-based journey stories" offer the pleasure of "unfolding of solutions to seemingly impossible situations" whether they are difficult puzzles or strong monsters that literally block the way for further advancement, spatially and narratively (132). This pleasure of problem solving, providing answers to questions and mysteries, is perfectly embodied in the concept of the quest which intensifies the dual (ludic and narrative) driving force of CRPGs "by uniting the problem solving with the active process of navigation" (Murray 132). In essence, what Murray alludes to is Aarseth's intrigue.

The easiest metaphor to explain the discussion above is the idea of the CRPG narrative being a long and twisty river (or a road) and the narrative experience being the journey itself. The river, just like narrative, has its beginning and an end. When the player starts the game, he boards a figurative boat/ship and is provided with oars and paddles. The river flows in a singular direction no matter the bends, meanders, bights and inlets it has. The water and the passenger the river carries still flow to the ultimate ending, a delta or an estuary, an ocean, a lake or a sea. At certain parts the river is tumultuous, exciting, and even dangerous, and at others it is calm and soothing. The passenger/player has the *agency* to navigate the river as they please, straying from bank to bank, oaring quickly or absentmindedly, wandering from port to port, but there is no escaping the riverbed (unless quitting the game is taken into account). There is no bypassing the river's obstacles, narrow channels, rapids, river islets, and other geomorphological features. One has to find a way to oar through the fluvial landscape and find respite where possible. The ports and towns are also crucial to the experience because not only do they offer comfort and the ability to replenish supplies but also a further expansion of the journey. The obstacles, social and geomorphological features listed above, represent key points in a story timeline, kernels,

or knots where the plot thickens. The river is a simulated environment with carefully orchestrated events one has to reach in order to experience their narrative unravelling. This implies that games are simultaneously enabling and restricting player agency because one "cannot force a videogame character to leave the ergodic space built for it" (Jones 26). That is, "thematic development important to the narrative is restricted" as the game "only allows a player to move in certain ways or perform certain actions" by following the meandering flow of the river (Jones 26). "Yet game environments demand limits because they are always already external expressions that demand an external interaction" (Jones 26). The player approaches kernels of the story from the bifurcating avenues they choose. This allows them to regard the crucial event from the perspective of the story traversed so far. In that sense, this intrigue constituted agency dictates the way kernels are set into the sequencing line of the story and by extension of that, Aarseth's intrigue *is* the discourse aspect of the CRPG. Furthermore, CRPGs can also rely on the traditionally established narrative devices in terms of discourse. They have the purpose of arresting the ever-flowing sequencing engine of the CRPG as it is, out of all media, most immersed in the actualization of present moment. Cut-scenes or event scenes are perhaps the best examples of game-discourse devices which completely subvert player agency in favor of complete narrative overtake of the game. They can be constituted as uncontrollable in-game cinematics depicting an important dialogue or a full-on animated sequence with the purpose of storyworld representation/introduction/explanation of events. Cut-scenes entirely rely on pure diegetic or mimetic forms of narration and can be more easily understood by way of representation (in opposition to simulation as discussed above). During cut-scenes, the player is expected to sit still and pay attention to what is being portrayed on the screen in the form of a short film, animated or otherwise. In addition to cut-scene animations there are also introductory and final cinematics which set and end the narrative of the story entirely within the realm of narratology. One other time-arresting narrative device with the purpose of disclosing *how* the story is being *played out* is an in-game dialogue which allows the player to choose their response within the ongoing conversation with the NPC. By way of these dialogues, the player takes on additional quests, follows the storyline and expands their knowledge of the game universe, picks up additional clues in the ergodic-hermeneutic environment they traverse, and so on.

Baldur's Gate II is used here for the sake of example. The game opens with a mystifying and ominous quote on a darkened screen followed by a cinematic that depicts a wooden bookstand with two candles, a tin cup holding writing material, and a disheveled, leather-bound

book/manuscript. The "camera" zooms into the book opening by an unseen force and the pages start flipping to portray intangible writing and an illustration of a keep. At the same time the player hears the narrator's voice addressing them in the first person while illustrations follow what the narrator is saying in a deep, raspy voice. All the elements of this introductory setting overtly signify the idea of literally being immersed, drawn into a story. The magic of the atmosphere is enhanced by the ceremonial, ritualistic even, choir accompanying the transitioning illustrations of what is being narrated, basically a retelling of the key events in the first installment. The playing process has not even started and there are already multiple narrative techniques employed at the beginning. As the scene is being narrated the game clearly relies on pure diegetic conveyance of the story, yet the pages keep flipping as the new illustrations sharpen into focus and the narrator keeps matter-of-factly summarizing what "you" have already done. For the time of this cinematic recounting of events, basic sequencing of kernels, the player briefly occupies the hybrid position of a spectator and a reader. The game epitomizes the age-old desire to be transported into a fictional setting and by introducing the acoustic dimension to simple narration it blurs the lines between different media of narrative expression. After the events of the past "tome" have been recounted, the camera zooms out from inside of the pages and the bookstand with the manuscript and all the tools resurface again in the field of vision of the player/reader/spectator. Key information from the narration that needs mentioning here is that after having defeated the antagonist in *Baldur's Gate*, the story ends with the main player/character being kidnapped. After stepping away from the bookstand the screen goes dark again with sudden sounds of thunder and flashes of light, the setting is transported into a damp dungeon with low ceilings, hanging and clinging chains and shackles, torture tools lying around. The cinematic is now outside the realm of past events and the manuscript's function as a literal narrative device seizes to perform its duty. A menacing figure teleports in and out of barred vision signaling the maimed state the protagonist is supposed to be in. The introduction to the present state of events ends in a fading shot of dangling chains and menacing hooks in a dimly lit room. What opens next is the character customization interface. Here the player is expected to construct their persona that will inhabit the portrayed setting of imprisonment and continue the story by their own agency. The events of the previous game are important but not taken at face value or verbatim. What is followed is the notion of the protagonist's heritage with a vague recapitulation of what has transpired before. This means that the player/character is taken as the person who performed all the events in the past but is malleable to the desires of the present regardless of race/class/gender in the first game. That is, the player incorporates a heroic figure as a performer of all the deeds from the past but is not

constrained to the physical or any other features of character. Previously, the player might have chosen to role play as a chaotic neutral, elven ranger (if they even played at all), whereas in this case they have opted for a lawful good, human paladin. The story of the second installment of the franchise can be followed and experienced without the first one being inspected in detail. The introductory narration cinematic takes care of the player being up to date with events in case of such circumstances.

In establishing the discursive differences and levels of narrativity in video games by comparing them to traditional narrative forms, Jones states that reading or watching allow one to "assess an emotional or intellectual experience", whereas gaming allows one "to do something about it, if only in a simulated world" (25). Even though certain kernels and quests in the narrative river of the CRPG are inevitable, the bifurcating, hypertext nature of the ergodic narrative allow the player to have some say in *how* that final quest will be performed. He adds that games "have become more compelling for their audiences because they have sought to tie the gameplay experiences more coherently into the narrative's structure" (26). In-game dialogues, cut-scenes, and cinematics constitute "stronger narrative elements" which "work to create compelling characters and/or scenarios that help an audience flesh out some kind of meaningful interaction with the events and characters while allowing varying degrees of influence upon the storyline and/or the environment" (Jones 26). Moreover, the "narrative developed through the cut-scenes is one that seeks emotional impact by focusing" on the state of the accompanying NPC crucial to the story "while developing their individual personalities (Jones 27). "The characters come alive through dialogue" in which they interact with each other, share stories, jokes, insults, and so on (Jones 26). "On the other hand, these are scripted moments, and the gamer can function entirely autonomously within the environment while completely disregarding" them (Jones 26). The player can freely skip the cut-scenes and play the game just for the sake of the ludic experience, fully disregarding the narrative element of the CRPG. Cut-scenes are "beyond the gamer's control" who is "placed in a simulational environment, but is denied the ability to participate in dramatic moments that actualize her character as a member of the narrated community" (Jones 27). In *Baldur's Gate II* the beginning in-game cut-scene depicts the antagonist, Irenicus, torturing the player in a cell while hinting at his "untapped power" and god-like heritage (*Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn*). Irenicus' "experiments" are interrupted by a golem servant who alerts the evil mastermind of intruders entering the complex which forces Irenicus to attend to other matters. As he leaves the scene, a hooded figure wielding daggers runs towards the cell of the protagonist only to be stopped and

annihilated by magic from an unrevealed caster. The door to the northwest opens and another figure approaches the cell. This time it is Imoen, a childhood friend from the first game and she has come to rescue the player. She represents the first character able to be recruited into the player's party and as she frees them, the first step in the quest of the overarching intrigue mechanism begins. A dialogue interface opens and the player is able to converse with Imoen to gather information as to what is happening. Thus, the process of gathering clues begins on the diegetic level first, as a more sophisticated replica of Aarseth's concept of the cybertext revolving around intrigue as the game's narrative structuring mechanism. After having joined up with Imoen the player is able to explore the dungeon. To the northeast there are two additional cells, each holding a separate character who is able to join the player's party. One holds Minsk, a simple but hotheaded ranger, who the player has to enrage to break free from the confines of the cell on his own, whereas the upper cell holds a druid Jaheira whose cell requires a key. Rescuing the NPCs is entirely optional and it is within the player's scope of agency to proceed with the narrative of the game in which ever way they desire. Nevertheless, these simple tasks of breaking them free represent the first basic event nodes in the intrigue chain of the game which are noted in the journey log of the protagonist. The overarching kernel at this point represents breaking free from the dungeon complex entirely, how the player decides to approach that quest is up to them, with or without Minsk and Jaheira. This freedom of choice in traversing the ergodic landscape and fashioning the chain of narrative out of player's own volition epitomizes the open-ended nature of RPGs and the meandering structure of intrigue. Abstracted from the ergodic space of the game to visualize the narrative structure, each main quest/kernel leads to the next in a linear fashion similar to the one Chatman illustrated in figure 1 above, out of which numerous side-quests sprout in a bifurcating manner. They are not obligatory but they enrich the gaming experience by offering additional world exploration and character development. For example, at the Copper Coronet, a large tavern in one of the traversable cities on the Sword Coast of Faerûn, the player is approached by Nalia de'Arnise with a plea for help. Her castle has been invaded by intelligent trolls and she requires help to investigate and possibly save some of the members of her family that she hopes are being held captive. In that side-quest adventure the player has the opportunity to recruit Nalia and earn experience points and loot that will allow the further progression of the game. In this sense, the narrative/intrigue and the game strings intertwine into a governing principle of the video game mechanism which ensures the following of the narrative experience enriched by the game's *alea, agôn,* and *illinx* principles. The point of "leveling up" which comprises of killing monsters and, in doing so, earning experience points is to upgrade facets of the character identity (skills

and abilities). This, in turn, enables the player character to advance further in the game and defeat more difficult enemies until reaching the final "boss" of the game, in this case – Irenicus. The game is composed in such a manner to position the player at a great disadvantage right from the start to provide them with an enriching experience of "growing" and development, both in narrative and gaming terms. The disadvantage in level and skill is the driving force of intrigue that pushes the game forward on its ludic plane with the sense of gratification and success one gets from fulfilling the monomythic quests their adventures entail.

Also concerning the discursive level of the game narrative, the relationship between the player and their character is somewhat relatable to that of the actor and the character they portray on the stage. Jones argues that "the level of agency afforded to a gamer depends on how much she is allowed to function through the discursive level in the form of an avatar and alter the story level" (31). He establishes an effective definition of the avatar as "a malleable simulation that acts diegetically on behalf of the gamer and reflects the gamer's non-diegetic decisions" (Jones 31). The avatar or the in-game representation of the desired self is then a customizable extension of one's desires that enacts both ludic and narrative mechanisms of the video game inside the virtual environment. Based on that, Jones ascertains that "an ergodic dialectic makes avatar development" a contributing factor to the "overall sense of agency a gamer possesses" by compelling them to act and imbuing the avatar with a "dynamic function of both developer-defined possibility and gamer choice" (Jones 31). Therefore, it is possible to distinguish two kinds of agency in a CRPG, or agency functioning on two levels of the game - the narrative and the ludic. Both are characterized by restrictions respective to their systems of action, one operating inside the digital geography of the world, and the other employing narrative geography to navigate through the storyline. Player's diegetic agency can make their "non-diegetic decisions significantly consequential to the ergodic space in ways that are more than simple" disposition of obstacles or path-enabling puzzle resolutions (Jones 31). Therefore, Jones concludes that it is "premature to argue that games cannot tell stories; and it is certainly theoretically possible that games can tell stories as long as scholars allow different forms of narrative to evolve conceptually" (31).

Another CRPG world created by BioWare is that of *Dragon Age* with its first game published in 2009 under the title *Dragon Age: Origins*. In many aspects it represents the pinnacle of *D&D* based CRPGs with its massive open-world structure in a dark fantasy setting. The decade of technological progression allowed for significant sophistication in the gaming industry as graphics became more and more advanced. The sheer scope of content, both

narrative and ludic in nature, provided by *Dragon Age* far surpasses that of *Baldur's Gate* and inches closer to a hypothetical holodeck fantasy with each installment its developers produced. The world building frame narratives in the shape of idle books and scripts are larger in volume as compared to *Baldur's Gate* and their digestion from the perspective of the in-game reader reward the player in the form of collectible achievements which represents another aspect of narrative ludification. Furthermore, the isometric perspective is abandoned for a full 3D encompassing of the world with the option of traversing the landscape from a 1st, 3rd/over-the-shoulder, or bird's eye view perspective. This allows the player to shift their attitude towards gameplay, from a role-playing one to a more strategic control over the map in the event of battles. Every aspect of a CRPG is magnified in *Dragon Age* as opposed to its predecessors. From the scope and amount of main and side-quests to the number of explorable world-building mechanics and space navigation. Dialogues and character relationships are also enhanced to more faithfully mimic situations in the actual world as players are allowed to pursue in-game romances and establish strong friendships with their party members. Music and graphics have been refined and continue to be so with every passing year. The continent of Thedas in the imaginable world of *Dragon Age* is, thus, ever closer to fulfilling Murray's holodeck potential in terms of narrative as well as ludic expression. Races of elves and the Qunari have their own linguistically plausible language showcased in many scenes and dialogues in the game which enhance the sense of immersion and defer the breaking of the fourth wall. All the recruitable characters are voiced by actors and the game in general is implemented with more instances of voiced dialogue which results in a more encompassing narrative and game experience. The linearity of the quest/journey essentially follows the same intrigue formula as delineated in the cause *Baldur's Gate*, allowing for controlled meandering within the narrative-space, the difference being in the increased, refined, and sophisticated quantity of content. In terms of narrative expression, *Dragon Age* follows the same diegetic path as already discussed; cut-scenes, cinematics, and in-game dialogue as the main planes of narrative progression accomplished by following the intrigue/quest pathway structure of the game.

The second installment of the franchise, simply *Dragon Age II*, follows a preset character named Hawke. The sequel represents a sort of experimentation on narrative discourse as the story is framed in a sequence of narration during the course of interrogation interjected by intervals of gameplay which unravel the course of narrated action. The setting is a dimly lit room in which a witty, dwarf character, Varric Tethras, is being interrogated by Cassandra Pentaghast, a member of the religious body of law enforcement in Thedas. As she questions

Varric in a thick Orleisan, French-like accent (in the storyworld Orlais would represent a country similar to France in customs and language), he narrates the feats of Hawke and their company with additional commentary on his side. Thus, the game is structured as a film with gameplay interjections unlike in *Baldur's Gate* where the player is led to believe to experience the events noted down in a manuscript. *Dragon Age II* came up with clever solutions to restricting impasses of role-playing elements as the protagonist is already an established character. Regardless of gender which the player decides to embody, Hawke is addressed by his surname throughout the story and gameplay. This kind of communication allows for a broader encompassing of the audience as the surname's gender neutrality caters for both sides of the spectrum. Furthermore, the surname addressing resolves the computer memory limitations in voicing dialogues and other cut-scenes while still maintaining the illusion of immersion and self-projection in the process of role-playing. The sequel to the *Origins* title, which focused on world-building and exploration, successfully experimented with game narrative techniques that resulted in a not-yet-seen flavoring added to the playing experience. The way intrigue and quest resolution mechanism is approached in this installment is by way of literal detective play narration which provided the experience with a noir fiction hue and positioned the player on the double-seated stool of being both a player and a viewer/spectator. In a sense, the player helps the film unravel through the prolonged investigation framed by Cassandra's and Varric's quibbling. Varric's own rendering of what happens still leaves some space for meandering between the narrative margins as the player is allowed to influence the course of action by way of their decisions, just as in the case of previous CRPGs. The ergodic space of the storyworld is narrowed down to a series of campaigns and quests revolving around the city of Kirkwall as the geographical focal point of the story. The city is vast and highly interactive but the sense of liberty of exploration is very limited. Therefore, *Dragon Age II* represents a successful excursion into the exploration of narrative expression by way of the video game medium while still holding the recognized ludic properties established by its predecessors.

10.1. Questing Mechanisms

The current that induces movement through this fluvio-ergodic environment, are the hermeneutic and proairetic codes, which Barthes developed in *S/Z* in 1970. As Campbell points out, the quest already is a device used in mythology to denote a hero's legendary journey, a goal-oriented task with exploration and travelling as its key features. Quests in CRPGs have a role of narrative kernels which the player has to fulfil in order to advance further in the story and the game itself. They are designed as unexplained story elements that imply performing actions in order to reach the backdrop of the overarching storyline. Reaching the kernels offers multifunctional gratification not only in the form of narrative satisfaction but also as experience points and other ludic reward mechanisms. Chatman argues that actions equal events, and in the case of video games the process of unravelling the narrative literally implies performing actions on the player's part in order to constitute an event which can later be narrativized. The hermeneutic code ensures the player follows the detective-like atmosphere of the quest based CRPG. Barthes summarizes the properties of hermeneutic narrative in the form of raising questions that demand answering:

> "In short, based on the articulation of *question and answer*, the hermeneutic narrative is constructed according to our image of the sentence: an organism probably infinite in its expansion, but reducible to a dyadic unity of subject and predicate. To narrate (in classic fashion) is to raise the question as if it were a subject which one delays predicating; and when the predicate (truth) arrives, the sentence, the narrative, are over, the world adjectivized (after we had feared it would not be), (…) so the hermeneutic narrative, in which truth predicates an incomplete subject, based on expectation and desire for its imminent closure, is dated, linked to the kerygmatic civilization of meaning and truth, appeal and fulfillment" (Barthes 76; italics mine)

Barthes entirely encapsulates basic principles and quest mechanisms of CRPGs with his concept of the hermeneutic code. CRPGs are structured in such a way that every quest occupies the role of a question which prolongs the desire to uncover what will happen next. The player creates their avatar-character and transports its agency to the simulated storyworld which opens up the playing experience either by way of *in medias res* principle or the slow buildup approach. The game's design, in turn, forces the player to submit to the *quest*-ion resolving pattern and in that way construct his narrative as well as ludic experience. The questions vary in nature from determining the position of an object, uncovering the identity of the main antagonist, or preventing the ultimate absolution of the alternate reality, all of which function on the premise of discovering the truth with simulated navigation through space. Only at the very end, after

reaching and performing the final quest, is the player able to retroactively reconstruct the story of the game in its entirety and determine or reflect upon the discourse by way of which they got there. CRPG narrative, then, is the sole act and the experience of playing the game if events are taken as direct results of player action. Furthermore, the way in which events are undertaken in the ergodic environment constitutes the discourse counterpart of the ludic narrative. The second code the gaming narrative relies on is the proairetic form of the stringing of menial actions. Barthes states that the proairetic code consists of simple sequencing of actions "which is never more than the result of an artifice of reading" (19). In its basic understanding, the proairetic code is nothing more than the fundamental principle of narration; being submitted to the routine process of nomination (Barthes 19). It corresponds to the menial job of stringing actions together in a series of events and is best described in Barthes' own words:

> "Whoever reads the text amasses certain data under some generic titles for actions (*stroll, murder, rendezvous*), and this title embodies the sequence; the sequence exists when and because it can be given a name, it unfolds as this process of naming takes place, as a title is sought or confirmed; its basis is therefore more empirical than rational, and it is useless to attempt to force it into a statutory order; its only logic is that of the 'already-done' or 'already-read'" (Barthes 19).

The proairetic code in video games is also the basic structuring principle where the player transforms the process of nomination into actualization. The grammatical tense of the proairetic code ensures the process of nomination to embody the past, or as Barthes says, acts that have already been performed. In CRPGs, and games in general, the player relocates that process into the present, transmuting in that way the art of recreating into creating. Therefore, the proairetic code ensures the performing of actions in the present moment. By the extension of that, the basic experience of play in the *D&D* universe secures the regular flow of the story by relying on the proairetic sequence of actions that bind the narrative together. The player enters the kobold infested cave and the resolution of the built-up suspense depends on their own agency to perform the next action in the string of events stemming from the entrance. They draw a sword, prepare for an attack, cast a spell, loot the dead kobold, then move on to the next room, investigate the premises, inspect the items on the table of the room, and so on. The suspense on this level is manifested by the action itself and not by the player's desire to decipher the main mystery of the story/game as in the hermeneutic code. The interplay of the two codes is noted down in the in-game journal or log which helps the player navigate solely through the narrative landscape of the game. As a digital map of the world or a dungeon helps the player navigate

through the ludic aspect of the game and traverse the simulated space, the player/character journal keeps track of the performed quests and actions, and helps them maintain the course towards the ultimate resolution of the narrative. It maps where the player stands with regard to the predesigned series of events and the mythic goal of the main quest.

The example of *Baldur's Gate II* is used to explore Barthes' hermeneutic frame of narratvity. The game is divided into seven chapters noted down in a diary-like journal. Each chapter is denoted by a key point in the narrative of the game disclosed as the player succeeds in accomplishing the main quests of the storyline. Player's exploration of ergodic space and their fulfillment of quests is noted down in the history of the game-world and written out simultaneously in chapters. Moreover, player's actions and agency leave a significant mark on the world of the game with each dialogue decision followed by a consequence in the player character's social status. The player embodies an in-game persona that navigates the simulated environment under its set of social rules and customs mimicked by those in the actual world. If a player decides to disregard the rules of curfew set in a particular city, or perform a crime, they will be penalized and the social status of the hero will go down. The rapport of the party also depends on the quality of relationships established between its members. In some cases, the player has the option to delve deeper into the story behind one of their party members and help them resolve their internal struggles pertinent to their character in the form of a side-quest. Such instances in *Baldur's Gate II* are nowhere near as elaborate and engaging as in more recent CRPGs where developers recognized the power of character development and emotional bonding usually provided by novels. These types of branching off from the main storyline encourage players to invest additional efforts on the ludic plane of the game for the sake of narrative expansion, character bonding, and a more immersive narrative experience overall. Based on that, there are two types of events pertinent to their intrigue sequencing of narrative, one holding more narrative value and the other relating to pure ludic experience. The first group revolves around main quest completion, the suturing of the kernels into chapters of the game's storyline, it is encompassed by Chatman's kernels and follows Barthes' hermeneutic code. The second group encompasses the exploration of space for its own sake, treasure looting and ordinary monster hunting to achieve the sense of gratification games are capable of providing and can be considered under the proairetic code and in terms of Chatman's satellites. The hermeneutic code abides by the rules of Aarseth's intrigue in the fashioning of the cybertext, that is, the narrative of the game. The player has to pick up cues and information regarding their placement in the storyworld and the resolution of the initial predicament. As the

player character escapes the dungeon with the makeshift party of refugees, they surface in the town of Athkatla where Irenicus is battling a secret wizard organization called the Cowled Wizards who prohibit any unmonitored use of magic and seek and destroy all those who act against them. After a short display of Irenicus' and the organization's magical prowess, Imoen intervenes and casts a spell on her own in an attempt to harm her former captor resulting in her and Irenicus' own imprisonment by the overpowering forces of the wizards. Escaping the dungeon complex represented the first major kernel the player had to reach. Having accomplished that feat, the overarching narrative mechanism driven to a halt until this point starts spinning again as the player's next goal is to find and rescue Imoen. In order to do so the social landscape of the game has to be strategically traversed as the player is expected to establish connections and come in contact with the right people (NPCs) who will provide them with necessary information to fulfill their task. In order to do so, the player has to engage in play-pretend simulated events of communication and fighting which is why dialogue and battle are the most important actions performed on both the diegetic and ludic level of the game in the unravelling of its narrative. The liberty of action is suppressed to fit technological limitations of the medium. In dialogue interactions the player is given several lines as optional responses to the ensuing communication with the NPC. Meaning that the player cannot assume the full scope of agency as provided by its TRPG predecessor. Negotiation is still at the heart of both forms of narrative expression, the difference being in the nexus of the referential body that governs the process. In CRPGs it is the program, the game itself, whereas in TRPGs that role is occupied by the dungeon master. The player is provided with dialogue choices mainly depending on his alignment and the amount of points in charisma. If the player decided to role-play as a charismatic, lawful, paladin the dialogue instances they come across will allow them to maneuver the social landscape with persuasiveness lined with good intentions. Situations which would escalate into physical confrontations could be avoided by way of charismatic manipulation of the NPC. If the kernel/quest required to obtain an artifact from a devious but cooperative NPC by any means necessary, the resolution of the obstacle can bifurcate into two courses of action of very different nature. One ending badly for the NPC if the player chooses the violent option (including all the circumstances of the player character's identity) and the other navigated with diplomacy, thus amiable for both parties. Both situations result in a sort of a reward for the player. If they decided to get rid of the NPC, they may loot his body after having disposed of him which could potentially hold more useful items aside from the quest-related artifact. If they opted for diplomacy, the player might receive additional experience points as a reward for his confrontation-avoiding approach and his status as a peace promoting

hero in the realm can reach new heights. Based on the above, what "affords agency to the gamer" is "developing an ergodic consequentialism that helps determine the gaming incident within a specified range of possibilities by affording an incredible sense of authority over the artifact's form to the gamer" (Jones 30). Therefore, user agency is "an essential element in the discursive level of narrative development" of CRPGs (Jones 30). Summarizing Chatman, Jones claims that traditional narrative forms only allow one-sided interaction of the audience and the narrative artifact as they "form a semiotic and semantic dialectic where meaning is derived from the symbiotic relationships of 'expression' with 'content' and that of 'form' with 'substance'" (Jones 30).

11.   Myth-and-Symbol School

This chapter covers the segment on American Studies necessary for the exploration of cultural myths incorporated into the video game structure. R. W. B. Lewis contends that culture is borne out of an ongoing debate "over the ideas that preoccupy it: salvation, the order of nature, money, power, sex, the machine, and the like" (1-2). The process of a culture achieving the status of mainstream identity is not by way of certain ideas or convictions becoming more popular than others but through them maintaining the position of a "peculiar and distinctive dialogue" (Lewis 2). In efforts "to build a broader study of national character and consciousness" the first generation of scholars "sought connections across imaginative works and popular culture, politics, anthropology, sociology, and economics" (Klein 155). That is, according to Lewis, a reading of a society is achieved by way of looking "for the images and the 'story' that animate the ideas and are their imaginative and usually more compelling equivalent" (3). These unearthed fundamental "stories and images" and are treated "as mythic and symbolic reflections of the dominant ideas in a given time" (Klein 155). While they are "formulated in the orderly language of rational thought," the images also find their form "in a recurring pattern," that helps organize "a certain habitual story, an assumed dramatic design for the representative life" (Lewis 3). Finally, the culture yields up "its own special and identifying 'myth'" when "the results of rational inquiry are transformed into conscious and coherent narrative by the best-attuned artists of the time" (Lewis 3).

One such identifying myth is Alan Trachtenberg's *Brooklyn Bridge* which offers a synthesis of idealist and materialist epistemology in the blend of history and myth (Klein 157). Bruce Kuklick, by way of Henry Nash Smith, argues that "symbols and myths designate larger or smaller units of the same kind of thing: an intellectual construction that fuses concept and emotion into an image" (72). Moreover, Leo Marx states that by elevating images to the position of myths or symbols one makes the image "carry a burden of implication (value, association, feeling, or, in a word, meaning) beyond that which is required for mere reference" (qtd. in Kuklick 72). Based on that, Kuklick argues that "we invest the image with much more than a denotational quality; we enable it to connote moral, intellectual and emotional qualities of wider and wider range" (72). Furthermore, myths and symbols "at best *reflect* empirical fact" and as such are "complex mental constructs" and not facts themselves (Kuklick 72). According to Trachtenberg, "facts have a specific spatio-temporal location," whereas "symbols have a place in the mind" (Kuklick 72). As mental constructs, "images and symbols are often visual in

quality" and language reinforces their "internal status" (Kuklick 73). As mental entities, images "have the capacity to appear in many minds" and hold a "platonic status" in "America's collective imagination" (Kuklick 73). That is, the images "exist independently of the people who think them" and they become present in the collective consciousness by occurring "with relative frequency in the work of many authors" in any form of art (Kuklick 74,76). Having that in mind, Kuklick argues that "one of the primary purposes of the American Studies movement is to demonstrate the way in which these 'collective' images and symbols can be used to explain the behavior of the people in the United States" (73). In addition to that, Lewis claims that "the emergent American myth and the dialogue in which it was formed" remain a "collective affair" as they were "not fashioned ultimately by a single man of genius" (4).

Under these conditions, the paper proposes the idea that the fundamental images of the sense of the American identity have the potential to manifest themselves time and again regardless of the form they are confined to. This argument also underlines the fact that the myth-and-symbol paradigm negates the temporal disjunction between its own inception and the increasing presence video games start assuming in the popular culture as of the new millennium. American CRPGs not only incorporate national myths in their narrative structure but also operate on their symbolic principles as well. The rules of the game are organized in such a way to ensure the unravelling of the narrative in the form of myths and symbols of the American nation. Therefore, ludic and narrative mechanisms of the game's design coalesce in a myth sustaining medium which offer a modern platform for the reading of the American culture. Or, in other words, CRPGs represent new spaces for the continuation of the culture-sustaining dialogue as argued by Lewis.

Because of all this, it is important to state that analysis, however methodologically substantial, in itself does not adequately highlight the importance of the medium within a cultural context. For that reason, it needs to be reiterated that the video game medium is not only hybrid because of its narrative and ludic components, or the different media involved in the transmission of its content, but also because the rules under which it operates are both theoretic and cultural. Therefore, what may seem as an abrupt methodological gap, actually points to the heterogeneous character of the medium and the multiplicity of mechanisms it relies on, in order to convey a story and sustain the illusion of a functioning world system. What is more, narrative analysis is a necessary prerequisite for any type of discussion on the cultural importance of CRPGs due to their basis primarily adhering to narrative principles, that is, possessing considerable degrees of narrativity. Furthermore, the myths and symbols used to

construct the framework of the American national identity are narrative-like themselves. Marx argues that myths and symbols are visual, mental entities and, as such, can exist independently of people's minds. In his article "The Narrative Construction of Reality", Jerome Bruner claims that "cultural products, like language and other symbolic systems, mediate thought and place their stamp on our representations of reality" (3). Building on that, Bruner claims that "reality is constructed according to narrative principles" among which are "narrative diachronicity" and "hermeneutic composability," covered in this paper (6, 7, 21). Seeing how mythological imagery roots itself inside the national consciousness by way of storytelling, frequent enough to form a pattern and, thus, an image, it becomes clear why analyzing the narrative structure of CRPGs is necessary on both, theoretic and cultural grounds. Starting with this chapter, the paper focuses on the cultural imagery incorporated in the mechanisms of world creation in CRPGs.

12.　　The American Quest

The mixture of the monomythic, heroic figure and intrigue in the form of quest as the driving mechanism of CRPGs reflects the fundamental cultural patterns of America. Together they allow the player to occupy the position of the "authentic American as a figure of heroic innocence and vast potentialities, poised at the start of a new history" (Lewis 1). Just like the myth of the American Adam, the in-game extension of the player has about it "an air of adventurousness, a sense of promise and possibility" (Lewis 1). Even though Lewis claims that such an image is "no longer very evident" in the contemporary American expression, CRPGs offer a simulation of an environment where even the 'meekest' members of the nation have the opportunity to play at being the main figures of "a native American mythology" (1). Therefore, the "relevance of the Adamic myth" has gone through a process of cultural reanimation as it is evoked not only in a different historical setting but in a completely new medium as well. Lewis presents the idea of the American Adam as:

> "the image of a radically new personality, the hero of the new adventure: an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources" (5).

The ecclesiastical context surrounding the Adamic image adorns his "moral position" as one brought into existence "prior to experience," making him "the first, the archetypal, man," new and "fundamentally innocent" (Lewis 5). He is without past, "unsullied" by it and with a "clear conscience" (Lewis 7). Not only is the myth of the American Adam without a past but it has an inherent resistance to history incorporated into its structure. The "dismissal of the past" echoes an obsession for a transcendental agelessness and makes America "persistently a one-generation culture" (Lewis 9). The "principle of the sovereign present" as a cultural pattern is manifested by way of manic necessity to "root out vestiges of the culture and society of the Old World" (Lewis 16, 13). The symbolism of the idea of a historyless culture is opportune because it allows the nation to project an image of innocence which confronts "life in entirely original terms" (Lewis 14). Without the past to lie "upon the present like a giant's dead body," the nation has the ultimate freedom of self-arrangement and is allowed to enact the essential ideals of democracy where "each generation is a new people" (Hawthorne 161; Lewis 17). In such a nation, the burden of inheritance of any kind, spiritual or material, is non-existent (Lewis 16).

The protagonist of both *Baldur's Gate II* and *Dragon Age: Origins* is such an unburdened hero. Character creation implies the choosing of features, both functional and aesthetic ones, in order to produce a virtual extension of self. The cultural/ethnic/racial/national background of the hero has little to no impact on the main storyline. If the player role plays as a ranger elf who worships a woodland deity, their affiliations do not affect the manner in which the plot of the game will be resolved. Historical background of the player character is brief and usually concerns their upbringing or family history. It is deliberately vague and exists for the sake of logical continuity so that the character does not appear as birthed into existence out of nothing. The emphasis is on the present moment, the storyline at hand, and what the player does in the eventful setting they are immersed in.

Features of innocence, adventurousness, and novelty projected by the myth of the American Adam are perfectly encapsulated in the hero-protagonist of the CRPG. The process of character creation results in a figure mirroring the Adamic image in all its aspects. By way of their avatar, the player emerges into the simulation of a fictitious world fully matured yet without any burdens usually amassed by the process of "growing up", or "having a past." Character traits are meticulously customizable and the sense of emergent freshness manifests the desire for freedom of self-arrangement and self-reliance exuded by the cultural patterns legible in the American nation. Through CRPGs, the player has the opportunity to engage into a myth-producing narrative of the American nation as they embody the image of a capable and free figure adventuring into the wilderness to spread or introduce order and democracy. The questing hero wanders the world, "young, pure, innocent" and helps answer the scholarly question of "what would happen if he entered the world as it really is?" (Lewis 91). The legendary features at the hero/heroine's disposal blend the myth of the American Adam with the Arthurian storyline in the monomythical context as described by Campbell. The supernatural qualities present in myths are canalized in CRPGs in the form of classes. In *Dragon Age: Origins* the player can choose to navigate through the landscape as one of three major classes: warrior, mage, or rogue, whereas in *Baldur's Gate II* the choice is less constricted as there are more classes and specializations to choose from. Regardless of the personal preference of class, the player's purpose is still Adamic/Arthurian in essence as they are placed on the path of a questing adventurer. These compartments of player abilities are represented through the ludic axis of the game as they have no impact on the resolution of the story itself.

By creating a new character, players participate in Lewis' dialogue of cultural production. In every adventurous step on the intrigue-quest path the players contest cultural

ideals and are conditioned to do so in a conspicuously American manner. Regardless of the number of NPCs in their party, player characters are self-reliant and without a past. Their novelty in the storyworld is exciting, brimming with potentiality of exploration as they navigate through the undiscovered landscape. The hero's quest is "a life determined by nature and enriched by a total awareness" beginning with a digital rebirth with every start of a new game (Lewis 26). The Adamic myth implies a cultural "return to childhood" evoked by post-war authors who desired to produce an inherently American figure in a pure environment unburdened by its cultural connections to the past (Lewis 26). Therefore, the 21st century CRPG represents a purely American setting as it allows its users not only to experience the narrative value of national images but to participate in their reproduction and reenactment. All the implications of the myth of the American Adam are both incorporated in the structure of CRPGs and manifested in the process of play. Lewis relies on Thoreau, among others, in illustrating the features of the image of Adam who emanates potential and innocence and calls for the starting of life "all over again" (26). The video game medium makes "a fresh start (…) literally and immediately possible to anyone wide enough awake to attempt it" which is what Thoreau calls for but under non-simulated conditions (Lewis 26). "Cultural and individual self-renewal was the aim of the day's most magnetic metaphors; it was the principle of Thoreau's celebration of the molting season and Whitman's giant leap to the beginning of time" (Lewis 103). However, Thoreau's vision is, in a sense, perverted as the experience that the myth of the American Adam projects is subjected to a process of distancing from the "end user". The subjects of the American nation are supposed to embody the characteristics of the myth themselves, and not once removed by way of simulation and in the context of play and mimesis.

Nevertheless, the digital platform for the establishing of a debate that the medium offers is uncontested as it achieves, enacts, and portrays all the symbolism of a cultural pattern extracted from literary bodies of work. Americanists locate the core of Adamic features in Cooper's *The Deerslayer* where the main protagonist represents "a self-reliant young man who does seem to have sprung from nowhere and whose characteristic pose, to employ Tocqueville's words, was the solitary stance in the presence of Nature and god" (Lewis 91). Lewis pronounces this type of figure "the hero in space" and argues that the "evolution of *the* hero of American fiction generally – begins rightly with Natty Bumppo" (91). To Lewis, "the hero seems to take his start outside time, or on the very outer edges of it, so that his location is essentially in space alone" (91). This directly mirrors the character creation mechanism of CRPGs as players are allowed to linger in that space of the in-between for as long as they like. It is a place before the

beginning of the story and denotes the lack of history the Adamic myth stands for. In *Dragon Age: Origins* the character creation interface is located in a dark chamber or a hallway. The walls are made of stone and the ceiling is supported by stone columns going up to an indefinite height. The light appears to come from torches perched on the walls but the actual source or direction of lighting is not observable. The atmospheric music is serene and solemn but at the same time ceremonial and ritualistic, hinting at the heroic undertaking that follows the birth of the mythic figure. The creation process itself is very similar to that of *The Sims* where the player is offered the opportunity to reinvent themselves in a new medium and a new environment. The result of their creation represents a "radically new personality" within the storyworld, no matter to what degree the player decides the character will reflect their own personality (Miller 5). The creeping fog on the ground of the *Dragon Age: Origins* character creation place further mystifies the unrecognizable space of character creation and helps prolong the illusion of a timeless chamber before the story's beginning. This place for self-reinvention, complete construction of self without a temporal dimension and history, is a modern manifestation of the symbolism evoked in the 19th century Jeremiads. The dangerous voyage across the ocean to find opportune grounds for freedom of self-expression and self-realization is epitomized by the CRPG character creation interface and the story that follows that segment.

The reason for calling the mythical figure "the hero in space" is because of "his initial habitat" being space and spaciousness, "as the unbounded, the area of total possibility" (Lewis 91). This characteristic of the myth is transferred to the plane of navigation and questing as the mechanism for structuring a story. The seeming boundlessness of the digital landscape makes the Adamic hero "surrounded, detached in *measureless oceans* of space" (Lewis 91; emphasis in the original). The CRPG Adam appears to be immersed into the storyline out of nowhere and starts resolving the plot by way of piecing kernels (or quests) together one after another. He is defined by the "yearning, the ceaseless musing, venturing, and seeking, the uncertain gestures of the spirit" (Lewis 92). One of the examples Lewis relies on to analyze the figure of Adam is Charles Brockden Brown's Arthur Mervyn[5], the "foolish young innocent: the

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[5] A conspicuously reminiscent choice of name especially in the context of Campbell's monomyth and the questing American Adam. The combination of both, the student and the teacher, in a single figure points to the innocently encompassed self-reliance found in the Adamic myth. The blatancy of implication the name Arthur exudes and the veiled insinuation of the phonetic similarity between Merlin and Mervyn produce a connection, even if only on a subconscious level, and underline Adam's narrative with epic connotations of a questing journey originated by the legend of Arthur itself. However, the same, perhaps involuntary, connection chains Adam with the shackles of history he so fervently tries to elude.

first of our Adams" (97). According to Lewis, "Arthur resembles his American successors in so far as he is genuinely solitary" (98). Like the emergent player character, "he does seem to have no relations in time; he has no past and no inheritance to help or to hinder him; he brings with him nothing more but a pure and empty heart and a mind like a *tabula rasa*" (Lewis 98). Adventure, then, seems "to be located (…) in the very heart of American life," a quality, without a doubt, foregrounded by the CRPG medium (Lewis 98). Throughout the post-war fiction taken as the basis for the myth, Adam is located in both the wilderness and civilization as its counterpart. While Brown's Arthur Mervyn meanders between the city and the forest, Cooper's Deerslayer brings "the hero fully to life by taking him out of the cities and cellars and putting him where he belonged - in space" (Lewis 98). Depending on the setting, CRPGs offers the entirety of space for the hero to explore and allow them to experience all aspects of the American myth. The emphasis of the questing narrative structure of the CRPG is on the adventure in the unexplored, the untamed or scarcely populated areas of the storyworld. However, every now and again the hero requires respite or is in need of indispensable supplies for the continuation of the quest for which they return to civilization. Nevertheless, the kernel of the journey is almost always "beyond the frontier" (Lewis 99). Lewis notes that for Cooper "the forest and the sea shared the quality of boundlessness; they were the *apeiron* – the area of possibility" (99). At the center of CRPGs questing narratives are always the wilds, the unexplored; the hero is always expected to venture into the unknown, no matter its shape or form. The play mechanism of progression relies on monsters and enemies who allow the player to advance and provide him with a sense of accomplishment via gratification. The enemies represent a threat to the hero's survival, a principle "in his essential character" which "requires him constantly to 'jump off' (…) to keep, as it were, two jumps ahead of time" (Lewis 100). Right from the start in any CRPG the player faces the unknown space. In *Baldur's Gate II* it is the damp dungeon the player has to escape only to find themselves in an unknown city of Athkatla. From there the questing narrative leads the player to other spaces waiting to be transformed into places in the player character's psyche. *Dragon Age: Origins* incorporates more of the character's background (insignificant to the plot) into the creation of the heroic figure's narrative journey. The perspective from which the player is introduced to the main storyline depends on the race and class they chose to role-play as but in all of them the player faces the unknown environment.

Cooper's intention to "transmute American experience into story" resulted in a profile of the "individual in America" who has "taken his start outside society" on a mission to

irreparably influence it, for better or worse (Lewis 100, 101). In analyzing Cooper's Natty Bumppo as "the full-fledged fictional Adam," Lewis encircles the framework of the figure as "*the* essential American soul … an isolate, almost selfless, stoic, enduring man (…) accomplished appropriately in the forest on the edge of a lake, with no parents near at hand, no sponsors at the baptism; springing from nowhere" (104, 105). The hero and the Adam are one, "innocent, vigorous, bright with hope, trustingly intimate with [their] surroundings" (Lewis 108). Therefore, just like the novel, the CRPG is "the culmination of a process which exemplifies the American myth" (Lewis 103).

CRPGs also allow the player to experience the other side of the questing figure. With the freedom of choice in their character's alignment, the players may opt to immerse themselves in the story as evil or not-as-innocent participants. Nothing stops the player from "going rogue" in a setting designed to evoke heroic and altruistic inclinations but CRPGs are structured to reward lawful alignment and a honed moral compass. Traversing the land while trying to resolve the main quest is much harder when the player has to deal with twice as much the enemies as opposed to when they are good natured or "innocent". Character class and alignment clasp together in another mechanism representative of the American culture which allows for the reading of its patterns from within the CRPG medium. Perry Miller's *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* provides additional context to the myth of the American Adam. Miller locates the Protestant ethic at the core of the American national identity. From the early Puritan sermons and jeremiads, Miller extracts strong convictions that "every man should have a calling and work hard in it" or that "everyone has a talent for something, given of God, which he must improve" (40-41). By way of the character customization part of the game, players choose their profession, i.e. class, and a set of ethical ideologies. The spectrum of morality ranges from lawful good, spanning over neutrality to reach the malignant end of the chart – chaotic evil, whereas classes include the roles of paladin, cleric, ranger, rogue, sorcerer, barbarian, and so on. No matter the choice of alignment, the player is forced to conform to the mostly altruistic scheme of the questing journey. Whether the player chooses to be good or bad, they will have to follow the kernels of the storyline in order to finish the narrative, and the kernel-quests are almost always altruistic in nature. The class/profession aspect of the game applies the Protestant urge for hard work more thoroughly. As the hero emerges without history and, therefore, without property, they are expected to work hard in advancing their profession of choice in order to progress through both the ludic and the narrative planes of the medium. Saving people in danger, retrieving stolen artefacts, and the slaying of monsters all presuppose

a degree of self-sacrifice inherent to the player character. On the narrative level, successful accomplishment of quests is rewarded by the further progression of the story, while on the ludic level, the player is rewarded with experience points and a symbolic monetary (or other form of treasure) compensation for their efforts. The experience points allow the player to improve in his calling and become more skillful in their respective class. Monsters and enemies drop valuable items upon being defeated or slain, which the player is allowed to pick up. Sometimes the player is not strong enough to face a difficult enemy and advance further in the storyline of the game. For that they have to rely on a specific type of gaming called "grinding" which revolves solely around monster hunting and looting their belongings in order to amass experience points and gold/items. It is laborious but very rewarding both in terms of game resources and the sense of accomplishment achieved on a psychological level of the player. The collected goods are sold for in-game currency or kept and used by the player to enhance his abilities. Therefore, grinding tied with ludic commerce reflect some of the essential aspects of the mythical American figure venturing out beyond the frontier, facing the dangers of the unknown. No matter the class of the player character, they embody the role of the Puritan hunter/merchant journeying out into the wilderness, fighting for survival in the preindustrial economic climate.

With unambiguous involvement of the image of the American wilderness in the cultural tapestry of its identity there is one more powerful notion it evokes – that of the nation on an errand. Miller defines the paradigm of the errand into the wilderness as that of "a society dispatched upon an errand that is its own reward" (6). "For once in the history of humanity (with all its sins)," Miller continues, "there would be a society so dedicated to a holy cause that success would prove innocent and triumph not raise up sinful pride or arrogant dissension" (6). The errand represents a cause of a single nation on a quest to redeem the entirety of the human race driven astray from its original path by earthly desires. The American is graced with an adventurous purpose to establish a God-worthy nation by beginning life anew, free of corruption and moral decay. He "could go forth to possess a land without ever becoming possessed by it" and be bestowed with prosperity "not as a consequence of labor but as a sign of approval upon the mission itself" (Miller 6). The aim of the quest was to achieve the rebirth of national spirit defiled by the mundane; a renewal embodied by the Adam without a past. In short:

> "The errand was being run for the sake of Reformed Christianity; and while the first aim
> was indeed to realize in America the due form of government, both civil and

ecclesiastical, the aim behind that aim was to vindicate the most rigorous ideal of the Reformation, so that ultimately all Europe would imitate New England." (Miller 6)

The errand presupposed the reshaping of the unknown into the known, transforming space into place, all the while tying together discovery with adventure in the process. The journey of the American on an errand mimics the adventure of the CRPG hero on a quest. As they travel through the landscape (both the questing player-adventurer and the American Adam) they introduce "adaptations to environment," expand the frontier, undertake commercial adventures (Miller 9). These activities "were thrust upon the society by American experience; because they were not only works of necessity but of excitement, they proved irresistible – whether making money, haunting taverns, or committing fornication" (Miller 9). Under these circumstances, the questing journey of the player character is the very manifestation of the errand into the wilderness. By way of a contemporary medium, the player is allowed to go through one of the founding cultural patterns taken to be *the* authentic American experience. The player is immersed into a storyworld which depends on them to resolve the threat to its harmony. More often than not, CRPG narratives rely on devastating, antagonistic forces positioned at the other end of the society with threatening intentions to destroy the world order as it is, or jeopardize its path to a harmonious version of itself. The moral depravity of these enemies is often of cataclysmic proportions and it is the player's sole purpose to try and prevent the world from descending into unethical chaos. By keeping in mind the hyperbole of fiction the genre is prone to, it is safe to argue that the opposition of such forces could be read as a metaphor for the myth of the questing Adam venturing into the wilderness to deliver the rest of the members of his race back into God's grace. *Dragon Age: Origins* offers for a double reading of the Adam's errand into the wilderness for redemption. The realm of Ferelden is threatened by an abominable host of monsters and the forces of good are in need of more recruits. The army trained specifically to face these Darkspawn is dwindling and the player character is recruited as a soldier to fight against them. Their recruitment represents a crucial point in the narrative of the game as before that point the player is slowly introduced to the atmosphere of the CRPG. The period before the recruitment represents a class and race specific interlude to the main story as the player explores their cultural background depending on their choice. For example, if the player chooses to role-play as a Dalish elf, a nomadic society of elves travelling the woodland realm of the Dales, he approaches the main storyline from this specific perspective. Dwarves, humans, and the city elves have their own short interlude which allows the player to explore the race specific setting before immersing themselves in the heroic

adventure. All racial starting settings are abandoned as the hero is recruited into the army of the so-called Grey Wardens on a selfless quest. From the point of them becoming a Grey Warden, their history ceases to matter, they are a "radically new personality" transformed by the ritual of the "Joining." The ritual is life threatening as it entails drinking Darkspawn blood in order to become a heroic figure necessary for the undertaking of the monomyth in this specific format. If the candidate survives the ritual, they obtain a connection to the Darkspawn hive mind called the Taint which imbues them with additional properties. This ritual is the second time the player undergoes a background erasing process and embodies the historyless Adam of this world. First they reinvent or transform themselves by way of their avatars and after they have gotten to know the cultural backdrop of their race and class, they erase that too in order to become a soldier on a selfless errand, the journey of which is the reward itself. The Grey Wardens offer another reading of the United States as a metaphor for the melting pot nations. The Wardens welcome all the races and classes into their ranks if their purpose is to abide by the principles of the order. Modesty, integrity, righteousness, and innocence are foregrounded as being the features of both the authentic American and the Grey Warden, regardless of their ethnic/cultural background. The origin of the corrupted Darkspawn is vague and preached in the shape of chants by the Chantry, Ferelden's version of the Catholic Church. The Chantry vests in the legitimacy of their dogmatic scripts which state that the Darkspawn were created by a civilization called Tevinter Imperium thousands of years before the present storyline. The most powerful members of the Tevinter wanted to reach the Maker, their god, by opening a portal to his Golden City. The chants state that they succeeded and entered the Maker's realm but in doing so they defiled the heavens with their corrupting avarice and transformed the Golden City into what is now known as the Black City. The Maker cursed them for this, transforming them into the first Darkspawn before casting them back to Thedas where they settled in the depths of the earth. From then, the Darkspawn come in intervals and in waves, threatening to destroy the civilization above, each time being cast away by the order of the Grey Wardens. The present storyline begins with the new Blight, a name for Darkspawn invasion, 400 years after the last one was successfully driven back. The Grey Warden order is in shambles and the player character is recruited by the order's commander, Duncan. The armies of Ferelden and the Grey Warden order join up to face the Blight but all are nearly destroyed as the forces of the Darkspawn are overwhelming. The player survives by escaping deeper into the wilderness from where they plan the next move on an errand to amend for the sins of their forefathers. The legend of the Tevinter Imperium represents a symbolic reading of the American myth of the errand gone awry. In trying to become the representatives of the entire civilization, Ferelden's

City upon a Hill that would bask in the glory of God, the Tevinter Imperium was crushed under the weight of its own rampant desire. Therefore, Tevinter Imperium serves as a cautionary tale of unchecked impiety and the crash of a mighty civilization. The premise of *Dragon Age: Origins*, and therefore the *D&D* based CRPGs, entirely encapsulates all the aspects of American mythology on narrative as well as ludic levels. The sin of the Tevinter Imperium represents Europe on a downward trajectory from the perspective of the early American nation. The Grey Wardens are a sacred order of selfless heroes who have taken the burden of deliverance upon themselves. They venture into the wilderness to face the dangers of world and despite carrying the taint of sin within them, they rely on it to remind them of the corruption they face if they should stray away from the path of righteousness. The narrative and ludic mechanisms help the player to immerse themselves into the authentic American experience. The narrative plane on the example of Dragon Age in terms of the Darkspawn and the Tevinter Imperium, whereas the ludic plane by way of character creation and the rules of the genre itself. The fact that the context of the American mythology is invoked in CRPGs points to the deep rootedness of the cultural patterns in the collective psyche of the United States. As an American product in all its aspects, the CRPG relies on narrative, ludic, and cultural principles to sustain the mechanisms of world creation in its own right.

However, what began as a heroic undertaking, resulted in the sprouting of an undesirable quality in the ego of the American national identity. The inherent altruism of the monomythic narrative presupposes a self-sacrificing figure whose virtue of quest justifies the means by which it is accomplished. In a manner of speaking, the myth of the American Adam and his errand into the wilderness begets the idea of American exceptionalism. In his article "On American Exceptionalism", Harold Hongju Koh states that the term is "said to have been coined by Alexis de Tocqueville in 1831" and it refers "to the perception that the United Sates differs qualitatively from other developed nations, because of its unique origins, national credo, historical evolution, and distinctive political and religious institutions" (1481). Furthermore, the "phrase sometimes also connotes the notion that America's canonical commitments to liberty, equality, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire somehow exempt it from the historical forces that have led to the corruption of other societies" (Koh 1481). By relying on Margaret MacMillan's book *Peacemakers: The Paris Peace Conference of 1919 and its Attempt to End War*, Koh argues that "American exceptionalism has always had two sides" (MacMillan qtd in Koh 1481). One part of the conviction is always "eager to set the world to rights," while "the other ready to turn its back with contempt if its message should be ignored" (MacMillan

qtd. in Koh 1481). "Faith in their own exceptionalism has sometimes led to a certain obtuseness on the part of Americans, a tendency (…) to assume that American motives are pure where those of others are not" (MacMillan qtd. in Koh 1481). In other words, "the United States has a profound tendency to lead a foreign policy in which it seeks to dictate the terms of affairs, using its unquestionably vast power to push its agenda, an agenda based on domestically generated values that do not brook foreign insights" (Engle 326). Transferred into the context of the subject matter of the paper, the adventuring Adam takes it upon himself to introduce order and civilization under the guise of freedom without any solicitation. They venture into the wilderness with complete disregard for the preexisting natural or social systems under the impression that it is their quest to "set things right". However, the CRPG narrative arranges the setting so that the exceptionalism of the hero is justified. They are indispensable for the salvation of the world they are absorbed in like in the case of the Grey Warden in *Dragon Age: Origins. D&D* based CRPGs generally depict worlds monochromatically, in the sense that they are always in need of a hero who will have Adamic qualities (innocence, selflessness) to deliver its inhabitants from their impending doom. As such they are structured to cater for the myth of the exceptional hero who cannot do wrong in their desire to do right. The questing journey of the CRPG reflects the illusion of the United States incorporates into its national identity that they are fundamental for world harmony and order. Without America, the world is doomed to crumble back into savagery as Tevinter Imperium has fallen from God's grace into the mindless inhumanity of the Darkspawn. The American Adam is indispensable in the mechanism that sustains peace in the world and CRPGs help project that illusion back into the nation's identity.

The CRPG version of the errand allows it to unfold in its purest form as envisioned in the Jeremiads of the 17th century clergy. Whereas the real American has to cultivate amnesiac patterns of the gone-awry nation, the simulated landscape of the heroic narrative allows the player to engage in and fully manifest the original implications of the authentic American mythology. Every mishap in the game can be corrected as the player can simply load back to a time where they have not wronged. To go even further, every time the player gets a sense they led the narrative in a wrong, malignant, direction, they can restart the game and invoke the Adamic myth of renewal more exactly. The willing amnesia and the exceptional character of the American identity make for a toxic couple embodied by the contemporary national ego. CRPGs offer a platform where the disgrace of the failed errand is guaranteed never to happen on the narrative plane of the game, i.e. the game's history. The American Adam is sent on a journey to win back the lost innocence of its race for God's grace alone. In terms of Campbell's

monomyth, the errand into the wilderness is an Arthurian quest for the holy grail voluntarily taken over by a single nation. The movement through space the Adamic monomyth entails invokes an inherently American sensation of traveling, exploring the vastness of the West, transforming space into place. National figures, both fictional and real (Lewis and Clark), undertake an epic journey sold today as a cultural product in the form of entertainment, accessible to each and every member of the American nation and more. Danger and survival the questing hero faces, once very real and indicative of the authentic American experience, are turned into a commodity, a traversable story of play-pretend.

13.   Conclusion

The intention of this paper has been to explore the structure of video games in order to observe new avenues of studying culture. The nature and the novelty of the medium required an investigation into its composition before offering a reading of culture through such a prism. Generally speaking, video games consist of theoretic and cultural mechanisms that organize their content. The theoretic set of mechanisms relies on all things game-like and is encompassed by ludology, the study of play, but also on the narrative value those playful elements carry - narratology. Simply stated, narratology and ludology constitute two fields of study unavoidable in exploring the framework of video games. The remaining set of structuring principles is embedded in culture and as such requires its own methodological approach. As cultural patterns reverberate through history in the form of media they manifest in, it is a matter of time before they infiltrate the academic sphere of interest as exemplary pieces for critical observation. In that respect, the question at hand is what held them back for so long, seeing how their presence has been highly impactful on both the cultural and economic sphere of life. With their ability to convey significant pieces of culture by way of different media, their analysis is predominantly narratological in nature, however, that same heterogeneous property leaves enough space for other methodological tools to be employed in their investigation. The pivotal figure around which the genre is established is the adventuring hero who embodies features crucial to the conception of the American national identity. The basic experience their questing journey offers is that of the pioneering American on which the figure is modelled. However, in order to draw a valid conclusion on the state of the subject matter and potential routes of exploration, some of the key properties of the medium are reiterated.

CRPGs, and other genres of video games, require the player to assume the position of the protagonist of the story they convey. The mechanisms they rely on in order to incorporate the player into the narrative structure of the game are delineated by Aarseth. He proposes cybertext as the essential structuring principle of narrative in games. According to Aarseth, narrative works that require non-trivial effort in the process of their consumption are encompassed by the term of ergodicity. In order to unpack the narrative dimension of a CRPG, the player has to navigate the digital landscape, converse with non-player characters and observe scripted actions in the form of cinematic reenactment they have no control of. Therefore, cybertext and ergodicity together represent a novel form of narrative transmission where the player is expected to piece together the chain of events by themselves. Modern video

games rely on a sophisticated version of cybertext in uncovering the underlying story of the game itself – intrigue. To Aarseth, intrigue *is* the story of a video game and it is "read" by way of player exploration, that is, by way of employing additional efforts to traverse the narrative of the game. The technique which allows the player to act on their own in traversing the ergodic space in the process of collecting information to compose a story is agency. No other medium allows its user to choose the path from which they can observe the story. Moreover, no other medium enables its user to "work" or act as if in a play in order to experience the narrative. The video game, is after all, a simulation of a functioning system upheld by its own set of rules and mechanisms which the player subscribes to in order to participate. Simulatory features immerse the player into the fictitious world sustained by narrative and ludic components. However, there are in-game devices that completely subvert player agency and rely solely on traditional narrative methods in conveying a story. Cut-scenes and cinematics are uncontrollable segments of narration that depict an important dialogue or a full animated sequence with the purpose of storyworld representation. During a cinematic or a cut-scene, the player can either choose to skip the diegetic/mimetic sequence entirely or assume the role of a viewer and observe the scripted unfolding of events. Therefore, cut-scenes and cinematics represent traditional methods of relaying a story within a hybrid medium. In conclusion, CRPGs constitute one of the typical weaves "of gameplay along a [labyrinthine] ergodic path that is broken into segments with cut-scenes" (Jones, 2008: 30). "The path is a spatial one that can" be navigated "from point A to point B (…) "while achieving goals X, Y, and Z" and is a part of a "complete, four-dimensional world that allows her [the player] to go anywhere at almost any time" (Jones, 2008: 30). The player character is "dropped into one massive ergodic space containing" towns, forests, meadows, and other explorable spaces "with all the accountrements" (Jones, 2008: 30). "Spotlighting narrative development [by way of cut-scenes] focuses the gamer's attention to the congruence of a few specific events that might affect the entirety of the world around her avatars" (Jones, 2008: 30). This argument alone encompasses the essence of the paper relying on the presumption that video games create worlds reliant on both ludic and narrative building blocks. Their aesthetics are a mixture of geography and storytelling, the mechanisms of which only come alive in interaction with the user's agency and creativity. Video games, just like any other interactive media, have the ability to be "incredible modes of expression, but the audience needs to be aware, not just of the phenomenologically 'here-and-now' but of the underlying message within" (Jones, 2008: 32). CRPGs place the player character into a "functional four-dimensional world accounting for both time and space where she can choose from so many different possibilities" (Jones, 2008: 33). Therefore, "the end

result is a focus on the here-and-now without a ton of critical interest in a coherent understanding of potential expressed meanings, either through narrative structures or otherwise" (Jones, 2008: 33). Pairing this emphasis of the action in the present moment with technologically mystified theoretical grounds, any attempt at analyzing narrative transmission falls into a kaleidoscopic trap of the medium itself.

Western CRPGs evolved from a TRPG analog predecessor, *D&D*, which undeniably situates the medium in an American context. The superficial value of establishing a genealogical connection of the genre to the culture it emerged from not only confirms the product's origin but also necessitates the existence of, deliberately or inadvertently, incorporated cultural patterns into its construction. The paper has claimed that the features of the genre and the rules under which it is structured project the experience of the authentic American figure. By way of intrigue, the protagonist is required to assemble a narrative chain of events independently. Navigation through a digital landscape teeming with dangers and the unknown ensures the kind of experience inherent to a cultural imagery posited as crucial in the establishment of the American national identity. A lone figure, venturing into the wilderness on the quest of self-reinvention saturated with symbolism of mythical importance. The sense of exceptionalism and the hero's self-worth are inflated by the severity of the quest directed to concern not only a single nation but the entirety of the human race. When observed through a theoretic lens, the questing hero's journey translates to traversing the landscape relying on intrigue to piece together narrative kernels and form a story. This conception of the game itself in which the player assumes the role of the travelling hero reflects American mythology on a basic level. The player character's lack of a meaningful past points to a national desire for freedom and innocent emergence into the unexplored as inscribed in the image of Adam. The presence of the American mythology in the modern medium of video games does represent a focus of the narrative and ludic content the players consume for entertainment. They are simply mechanisms that support the storyworld and prolong the illusion of immersion. However, they do point to the embeddedness of cultural imagery in modern media of entertainment and expression. The translation of myths and symbols from one media to another and their ability to withstand temporal decay point to how deeply rooted cultural patterns are in the collective psyche of a nation. With all the mechanisms and images implicated in their structure, CRPGs represent a modern cultural product inherently American in all its features. The purpose of this paper has been to investigate how cultural imagery is contested and employed in the construction of a modern form of entertainment in order to expand the inventory of the analysis

of culture. With the medium's reliance on the ever-advancing technology it will be interesting to observe the course of the nation's mythological corpus. What will happen with the Adamic figure and the protagonist of the monomythical journey once simulation is equipped with adequate weaponry to combat the definiteness of reality?

The hope this paper maintained was to showcase video games as a cultural artefact worthy of critical observation with the purpose of subverting their unrightfully underrepresented position in the academy, especially in the scholarship of American Studies. The deeply rooted cultural images of the American society incorporated in the medium point to its ability to project narrative strands of a nation as the classical media have done for centuries before. Its hybridity and adaptability make it lucrative for a plethora of analytical approaches yet its visibility remains obscured by the uncompromising mountain that are classical media. The biggest obstacle to video game representability is the academy's unwillingness to step outside the spellbinding circle of tradition restrained with prejudice of frivolity. The neglect of the medium's potential leaves the humanities impoverished for a significant experience of culture, one that tells a story through the eyes of play.

14.   Works Cited

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Summary

This paper analyzes the structuring principles of video games. The methodological approach of the analysis relies on narratological, ludic, and cultural tools which are used in the investigation of the CRPG genre. The main contention is that the *D&D* based CRPGs represent an extension of cultural images of the American nation, which are sustained by storytelling devices. That is, video games represent a modern platform for narrating the mythology of America. Classical narrative aspects are reviewed by way of Seymour Chatman. Crucial adaptations of narrative principles to new digital spaces are encompassed by Espen J. Aarseth's "Cybertext". Lastly, the national imagery found in the medium is covered by way of Perry Miller and R. W. B. Lewis. To exemplify the argument, the paper relies on BioWare's *Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn* and *Dragon Age: Origins* as pivotal video games of the genre.

Key words: video games, structure, narratology, ludology, culture, nation, mythology.

Sažetak

U ovom se radu analiziraju principi strukturiranja videoigara. Metodološki pristup kojim se postiže analiza oslanja se na naratološke, ludološke, i kulturne alate uz pomoć kojih se proučava žanr CRPG ova. Glavna tvrdnja temelji se na ideji da CRPG igre D&D stila predstavljaju ekstenziju kulturnih predodžbi američke nacije, a ovise o pripovjedačkim alatima. Točnije, videoigre predstavljaju modernu platformu za pripovijedanje američke mitologije. Klasični narativni aspekti analiziraju se preko Seymoura Chatmana. Ključne adaptacije narativnih principa u novim digitalnim prostorima obuhvaćene su E. J. Aarsethovom idejom kiberteksta (eng. cybertext). Naposljetku nacionalna simbolika prepoznatljiva u mediju istražuje se preko djela Perrya Millera i R. W. B. Lewisa. Argument rada oprimjeren je igrama Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn te Dragon Age: Origins kao ključnim igrama žanra.

Ključne riječi: videoigre, struktura, naratologija, ludologija, kultura, nacija, mitologija.