Anatomy of a Villain:

Play, Story, and Conflict

in Single-Player Video Games

by

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ABSTRACT

During the first half of the last decade, there was a heated debate regarding what type of critical approach best suits the study of video games. Those who argued for approaches traditionally associated with narrative studies were primarily interested in video games as a new frontier for storytelling. The opposition claimed that video games are not systems for storytelling, and that applying literature and film theories to video games dismisses the interactive nature of video games as *games*. The argument was bitter, but ended abruptly with no clear results or consensus. Yet are narratology and ludology, the two proposed critical theories, so disparate that the use of one means the exclusion of the other? This paper suggests the possibility that narratology and ludology share more in common than critics have thus far realized. Both games and story share themes of conflict, and in focalizing on the antagonist of single-player video games it becomes possible to trace the development of conflict and how it functions in the video game medium. In analyzing antagonists and the conflict they embody, it becomes apparent that narratology and ludology are not so incompatible in their methodologies and assumptions. Finally, because video games themselves are a multifaceted medium, it is only appropriate that critics use multiple theoretical approaches in their analysis to broaden critical knowledge of how the medium functions.

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THE NARRATOLOGY/LUDOLOGY DEBATE

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, many who saw video games as a new medium for scholarly research took part in a heated debate regarding what type of critical approach is best suited for the study of video games. The two camps were divided among those who saw video games as a new form of storytelling (including theorists such as Janet Murray and Henry Jenkins), and those who claimed that video games may contain story but that story is not an essential aspect of the medium (such as Espen Aarseth and Gonzalo Frasca). The play theorists, who adopted the term ludology to refer to the study of play, asserted that the study of games as systems of storytelling misleads critics because it allows them to ignore the other aspects of the game and how it functions (Aarseth, "Quest Games" 362). One of the most vocal ludologists, Markku Eskelinen, states, "if you actually know your narrative theory…you won't argue that games are (interactive or procedural) narratives or anything remotely similar" (36). The narrative theorists were undaunted, however, and doggedly maintained that narrative theory—particularly narratology—is an appropriate lens for the analysis of video games that contain stories,

> Many games do have narrative aspirations...Given those narrative aspirations, it seems reasonable to suggest that some understanding of how games relate to narrative is necessary before we understand the aesthetics of game design or the nature of contemporary game culture. (Jenkins 119)

The narratologists even proposed that the two theories could possibly be combined, or at least the two camps could find some kind of common ground because the video game medium “recombines and reinvents” them with little effort (Jenkins 119; Murray, “Game-Story” 10).

The debate continued until the mid-to-late 2000s with the only evidence of progression being the narratologists’ concession that gameplay is an integral part of a video game and must be taken into consideration when analyzing a video game through any type of lens (Mayra 313; Pearce 144). Suddenly the debating came to a halt without any real conclusion or definitive winner. Jesper Juul attributes the cessation of hostilities to theorists who pointed out the debate had already taken place in the game development community some years before (Costikayn 5-6; Juul, “Ludology” 363). Perhaps the critics themselves decided the debating was not making progress and chose to pursue other interests, or continue their line of criticism while only alluding tentatively to the argument to which they previously devoted so much time and scholarship. Yet the sudden, inconclusive ending could leave some, and especially gamers, dissatisfied.

It is due to such dissatisfaction this paper exists. Throughout the last few years as I have read articles on both sides of the debate I often found myself asking a question. Are narratology and ludology so disparate that the use of one means the exclusion of the other? Or, taking a more radical standpoint, can the two theories actually work together to deepen

our critical understanding of the video game medium as some of the narratologists, particularly Murray and Jenkins, proposed? In broaching this topic, I do not intend to rekindle the fires of the debate, but rather I would like to extend the possibility that the distance between the two theories is not so great that they cannot work in tandem. The next question, then, is where does one begin to bridge the gap between two theoretical approaches that were formerly presented by theorists as competing opposites? However, before answering this question, it is important to specify the type of video games I would like to analyze in this paper. Because narratology is not very helpful in analyzing games with no story, such as *Tetris*, then the games analyzed in this paper must contain a story. Though massively multiplayer online games and other multiplayer games can and do contain stories, the multiplayer aspect adds too much complexity for my present purposes. As such the analyses included in this paper will focus on single-player video games containing a story designed and implemented by the games' creators. Furthermore, I use the term "story" as defined by Gérard Genette that is "the signified" of the text. It is the progression of events that the reader, player, or viewer pieces together in their mind rather than the signifying text itself (27). That being said, the answer I would like to propose to the question above regarding the potential liaison of the two theories can be found in the word one might use to describe the critical debate outlined above: conflict.

Single-player, story-driven video games place players into a fictional conflict that the player spends the majority of the game working to resolve. Game designers Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman state, “All games embody a contest of powers. The contest can take many forms, from cooperation to competition, from solo conflict with a game system to multiplayer social conflict. Conflict is central to games” (loc. 1286). Conflict pits players against opposing forces ranging from minor non-player characters (NPCs) to memorable antagonists who attempt to hamper the player’s quest for resolution. The minor NPCs are generally only gameplay obstacles for the players to overcome, but antagonists work in both the spheres of gameplay and story. That is, the antagonist opposes and rebuffs the player and player-character by defining what is at stake within the game’s fictional world, as well as serving as an obstacle those players must ultimately defeat within gameplay in order to resolve the conflict. Because antagonists of single-player, story driven video games operate within both levels of story and gameplay, analyzing them through both narratological and ludological lenses will help bridge the gap between the two theories. In arguing this, I hope to show that the two theories are not so dissimilar that the use of one does not come at the expense of the other. Furthermore, understanding the function of antagonists in single-player video games may help critics and theorists find other commonalities and structures for analysis that will help deepen our understanding of how both narrative and play operate within the medium. In order to accomplish

this goal, this essay is split into four pieces. First, it is important to understand how conflict works both within play and story as well as defining where a single-player, story-driven video game stands within these two frameworks. This will help contextualize how the antagonist works in a general sense, and will be useful for transitioning into the developmental history of antagonists in video games. Tracing this history will show how antagonists operate more specifically in the video game medium in both realms of story and play, and begin to shed some light into how the two theories can work together. With that history in mind, the analysis of a fairly recent title will show narratology and ludology are not so disparate that they cannot work in tandem. Finally, the study cannot be complete without analyzing models that subvert the main functions of video game antagonists in some way.

CONFLICT IN NARRATIVE AND PLAY

While not all types of games and stories possess conflict, it is a common element found in both. Johan Huizinga and Roger Caillois, two of the foundational theorists of play and game studies, referred to conflict in play settings using the Greek term *agon*. Huizinga argues that *agon* perpetuated every part of the historical development of culture including law, religion, philosophy, and so on (30-31). Huizinga's definition of *agon* is quite extensive. First, tension and uncertainty increase dramatically when play becomes agonistic (47). Second, *agon* implies there is something at stake, and closely tied to that is the notion of winning. One overcomes another in order to obtain whatever is at stake. Finally, winning does presuppose that there is an opponent and *agon* cannot be *agon* without a mutual sense of rivalry shared between the opposing players (49-50). Due to this final aspect of Huizinga's definition, it is clear single-player video games are not *agon* as Huizinga defines it due to the fact the game's system cannot share a feeling of rivalry with the player because—on a fundamental level—the video game is only an execution of code (Wolf and Perron 15). Caillois offers another term in his own definition of conflict that applies more specifically to video games: *ludus*. Caillois places *agon* under the umbrella term *ludus*, which he defines as goal-oriented play, stating that without *agon* a game that has something at stake is *ludus*, "the conflict is with the obstacle, not with one or several competitors" (29). Caillois says *ludus* "remains transient and diffuse"

without some degree of competition to give it meaning (32). Salen and Zimmerman make a similar statement, “Without a clearly defined goal, games generally become less formalized play activities” (loc. 4032). As such, something must account for the tension players experience while playing single-player video games. One possible answer that engenders tension is replaying either the same or a similar challenge at an increased difficulty level forcing the player to play more skillfully. However, without some sort of focus, even increased difficulty can still be “transient and diffuse.” At one time, and even to an extent today, a goal that could offer focus to a single-player video game was keeping track of a player’s accomplishments by means of a score. Because of scoring systems, solitary players could compete against themselves, or even indirectly against other players in hopes of achieving higher scores—as in a pinball machine. Another way for video game developers to induce feelings of tension in players, and very common today, is the inclusion of an in-game story.

Conflict within a story works much like *agon* does within play. The protagonist opposes an antagonist that can take the form of another character, society, nature, or even the repressed psyche of the protagonist. As in an agonistic game, there is usually something at stake, the competitors—especially when they are two separate characters—may feel a sense of rivalry with one another, and there is often a clear winner

at the conclusion of their agonistic relationship. The eminent reader-response critic, Wolfgang Iser, notes,

> From the Middle Ages to the late eighteenth century, *agon* was not only a strategy of play but, with the vast number of contests, tournaments, competitions, and other types of confrontation, it became a theme in itself and formed the basic structure of the plot in narrative. (263-264)

The key difference between *agon* in a game setting and *agon* in a story is the consumer of the story (i.e. the reader, film-goer, and so on) does not take part in this conflict and is only able to observe as it plays out. They may have sympathy for one side or the other, they may project their personality onto a certain character to whom they relate, they may even abhor a villainous character, but the consumer has nothing at stake within the story itself. Story-driven, single-player video games change that by placing the player within a fictional story. The player is then in a situation where something is at stake. Though, as Caillois argued, there being something at stake does not necessarily create *agon*. For *agon* there also needs to be a sense of rivalry and also equality, and an unambiguous victor at the end of the conflict. Thus video games add a few problematic ambiguities into the story's agonistic conflict due to the addition of the player and their role within the story.

While a single-player video game is *ludus*, developers may use the game's story to create agonistic emotions within the player. On a purely operating level, the challenges the player faces in a single-player game are all just a set of obstacles to be overcome. The story, the antagonist,

and the game's fictional world are built around a game's system (Aarseth, "Genre Trouble" 47-48). The fiction that is built on top of a game's code is representational and mutable, and conflict does not need to be portrayed as pure *agon* within that fiction. There are many books and movies in which the protagonist(s) of the story simply cannot compete on the same level as the antagonist(s), and single-player games often use the same strategy. A game can portray the antagonist as vastly more powerful than the protagonist up to the very end of the game. However, the game's system that underlies these representations makes no such distinctions regarding an antagonist's superior strength. At the game's onset, the player is usually not capable of defeating the game's antagonist, but instead the player is given smaller, more immediate goals to achieve that their current skill, health, and equipment levels make them capable of actualizing. As they continue to achieve these goals they gain strength, skill, and better equipment. Eventually the player will confront the antagonist. The story may still portray the antagonist as far more powerful than the player-character, but by that point the player is equal to the task of defeating the antagonist within the game system. Instead of immediate equality from the onset, single-player games present the player with a protracted equality by providing goals they are able to achieve and build upon until they are capable of defeating the antagonist. Though it is an indirect equality, it shows that a single-player video game is perhaps more agonistic than it might at first appear even if it lacks rivalry.

Can a player experience rivalry with an antagonist that, when stripped of its fictional representation, is nothing more than an execution of code (Frasca, “Simulation” 223)? When one removes the representation that portrays the antagonist as an evil agent within the story, they become nothing more than another *ludus*-styled obstacle to overcome. Yet this actually makes the fictional representation that much more important. By necessity, what is at stake in a single-player video game is fictional, and should not be thought of as the same as the championship game of a competitive sport. However, just because the game is fictional and does not put the player’s physical self at risk does not mean they are not less emotionally invested in the video game than an athlete is in their respective sport. And though it may not conform to the definition of *agon* per Huizinga and Caillois, it is possible for players to experience a pseudo-*agon* of sorts with the game’s antagonist. The antagonist is the player’s opponent, and though the execution of code cannot feel the same sense of rivalry with the player it is possible for the story to represent the antagonist with that emotion to (hopefully) create more tension and an overall more satisfying experience for the player.

DEVELOPMENT OF VIDEO GAME ANTAGONISTS

The next question to consider, then, is how do antagonists function within a video game? Tracing the development of conflictive forces in video games will provide the answer. I say “conflictive forces” because in early video games story, characters, and plot had not yet developed. Early video games did contain fiction that arose from the rules and setting of a particular game, but no narrative development (Juul loc. 175). Murray states, “computer games have developed multiple representations of the opponent, who may be another player,” or even, “a character embedded in the story” (145). Most early video games in the 1970s were two-player, agonistic games, and though players may have thought of themselves as the protagonist and the other player as antagonist there were no such distinctions within the video game’s fictional world (Rehak 113). Thus early video games were definitely characterized by Huizinga and Caillois’ concepts of *agon*, or competition, between players. However, even in some of these nascent video games a player could opt to play against an opponent built into the video game’s software instead of another human player as in *Pong* (Kent 43). When players chose to play alone, the computer (a term players use to refer to the opponent controlled by a game’s software) would assume control of the avatar that would otherwise be used by a second human player (Myers 56). By replacing a human opponent with a computerized opponent, video games were already creating the pseudo-agonistic relationship that players experience in the

single-player games that came later. Replacing the human with the computer still frequently occurs in contemporary video games, and especially in sports simulations like the *Madden NFL* series as well as modern two-player arcade cabinets such as *Street Fighter IV*. Though it is easy to differentiate the player's avatar from the opposition in contemporary titles, it was often the case in the 1970s that there was no visual difference between the player's avatar and the computer's outside of (perhaps) minor cosmetic differences such as color. Opposing players and players who chose to play against the computer competed for the same objective. Quite frequently this included the destruction or defeat of the opposing avatar as in *Spacewar!*, or obtaining a higher score as in *Pong* (Sellers 17; Wolf, *Video Game Explosion* 13). Players matched their skills against one another, or against the computer in order to show their mastery over a particular game's mechanics. This type of player versus player, and player versus computer dichotomy continued until video games designed specifically for a single-player entered the fray.

Game developers created video games like *Space Invaders* and *Pac-Man* for a single player to experience. As such, they necessitated some changes in the conflictive forces found within video games and antagonists began to arise. Prior to *Space Invaders* there was often no need to differentiate a player-controlled avatar from a computer-controlled avatar because the computer was merely a stand-in for an absent human player. This changed with *Space Invaders* where the computer-controlled

opposition stood in blatant contrast to the player-controlled avatar. Regarding the aliens of *Space Invaders*, Bob Rehak states,

> The game's aliens, with their oversized heads, small legs, and disproportionately large faces, were, for the player, plainly "not-I," but in another sense they were the player-avatar inverted—in the spatial coordinates of the screen as well as the flipped ethical map of their destructive agency. (114)

First, the antagonists of *Space Invaders*, as Rehak argues, did not allow the player to relate to them or sympathize with their goals as the player does with the "player-avatar." Second, their onscreen spatial contrast to the player's avatar defines their oppositional relationship to the player. In *Pac-Man*, the ghosts are also "not-I," and do not allow the player to identify with them in numerous ways. Regarding the titular character, Pac-Man, Rehak states,

> [Pac-Man's] organic status was marked by its color as well as by its only feature, a gaping mouth whose obvious function was as consumptive orifice…This pie-slice absence also structured Pac-Man's agency within the game, its ceaseless voracity. Like the player for whom it stood in, Pac-Man was never at rest within its infinite progression of mazes, consuming dots. (115)

Part of Pac-Man's appeal to players, according to Rehak, is that they were able to identify with the character through his "organic" design and the need to fill his voracious appetite marked by the "pie-slice absence." Furthermore, Pac-Man's character is very abstract, and the simplicity of his design encourages player identification. Regarding cartoons and comics, Scott McCloud states, "The cartoon is a vacuum into which our

identity and awareness are pulled…an empty shell that we inhabit which enables us to travel in another realm" (36). Avatars, such as Pac-Man, work similarly, but Pac-Man's ghostly enemies are an antithesis to this notion (Wolf, "Abstraction" 51). Where the motivation for Pac-Man's voracity is his missing pie-slice mouth, the ghosts' motivations and their visual designs serve to alienate players. The ghosts do not possess visible mouths in the game, and so already one of the links that associates players to Pac-Man is gone. Also, where the player controls Pac-Man's movements, the computer guides the movement of the ghosts and their eyes follow their directional motions showing they possess an agency outside of the player's control. In terms of spatiality, while they may not have an upper screen/lower screen dichotomy like that found in *Space Invaders*, the ghosts resist Pac-Man spatially by covering more screen space through their superior numbers, and also because they possess a "safe-zone" area which Pac-Man cannot enter.

Though they often times did not contain much story inside the game itself, video games from the 1980s began to develop more detailed back stories that began to explain, however briefly, the motivations for players, antagonists, and the events leading to a game's action. These stories developed from the fact game developers began to anthropomorphize the agents within a game thus creating the barebones of a storytelling structure (Belinkie par. 12). From that point on antagonists had their own goals, desires, and motivations beyond simply the

destruction of the player's avatar, and their motivations were presented as narrative exposition in game manuals and arcade flyers, or other paratexts "that refer to the game in some way" (Aarseth, *Cybertext* 117). One of the earliest examples of the use of a paratext is Nintendo's *Donkey Kong*. The backstory of *Donkey Kong*, explained by the game's flyer, is that the titular character and antagonist escapes from his abusive owner, Jumpman (who later became Nintendo's mascot Mario), and retributively kidnaps Jumpman's girlfriend (Blair 1). Thus the goals of the character Donkey Kong are to escape from his owner and perhaps gain some sort of insurance against recapture, or just plain vengeance, by kidnapping Jumpman's girlfriend. Donkey Kong's motivations also help define the player's goal of overcoming the simian antagonist and rescuing Jumpman's girlfriend.

Donkey Kong is a fascinating example because it blurs the line between good and bad, protagonist and antagonist within the story outlined by the flyer. However, the story explained in the paratext stands in contrast to the presentation of the characters in the game. Donkey Kong occupies the top of each level where he leers down at Jumpman while tossing objects like barrels to impede Jumpman's progress. He also smiles mischievously between levels as though the endeavors of escape and kidnap are, well, a game instead of retribution for mistreatment. Jumpman's sprite does not display much emotion aside from sharing a heart symbol with his girlfriend when he reaches the top of a level.

Similarly to Pac-Man, his lack of expression stands in contrast to his antagonist's expressiveness in order for the player to fill the character with her own personality. The paratextual story is not necessarily in concordance with what player's see in the game. So while the distinction between protagonist and antagonist was questionable in *Donkey Kong*'s backstory, the distinctions were clear while actually playing. In other words, as many critics have argued regarding video games generally, the aspects of story and play were at odds with one another in *Donkey Kong*'s case (Juul, *Half Real* loc. 1614).

The antagonists of popular games of the 1980s, most prominently those developed by Nintendo, followed this trend. Antagonists such as Bowser from *Super Mario Bros.* and Ganon from *The Legend of Zelda* were similar to Donkey Kong by their non-human designs and spatially inhabiting the end of levels and/or the game itself. Furthermore, most video games' stories remained separate from game play although the paratextual exposition of the story and what player's experienced in game were usually more in accord with one another than they were in *Donkey Kong.* Even games that featured in-game dialogue did not really progress story any further than it was outlined in their instruction manuals. The dialogue in games such as *Final Fantasy*, *Dragon Warrior*, or *The Legend of Zelda: The Adventure of Link* is very procedural, and generally only told the player where they should go next, what items they needed to obtain, and what enemies needed defeating (Murray, *Hamlet* 152). Such

procedural dialogue was probably the result of limited memory in 1980s game consoles and cartridges. Due to the constraints in consoles and arcades, antagonists were still primarily a structure of play. They were often prominent figures in a game's back story and were usually the cause of the action within the game, but they were little more than the final challenge for players to overcome within the gameplay (Miller 128). For example, Ganon in *The Legend of Zelda* steals the Triforce of Power, and takes Zelda hostage prior to the events of the game. The action of the game entails recovering the eight pieces of the Triforce of Wisdom in order to enter the labyrinth where Ganon resides. After fighting their way through the labyrinth the player finally confronts Ganon, and the game ends upon Ganon's defeat. Ganon never appears prior to the final confrontation and never speaks. His purpose in the story was to give reason for the player's actions, and his purpose in the game is to be the final obstacle for players to surpass.

The increase in memory capacity in the first game consoles of the 1990s brought with it the possibility of containing story driven dialogue as well as cutscenes to advance story. Because of these developments, video games were able to contain most of their narrative development within the game itself. Game designers could then avoid those potential incongruities between game and story like those found in the original *Donkey Kong*. As a result, antagonists could take a much more prominent role within the game by dogging players' progress, possessing more

personality than their 1980s predecessors through the use of dialogue, and the possibility of having more complex motivations than just being pure evil. A well-known example, but by no means the first or only example, displaying these changes is *Final Fantasy IV* (It was originally released in the United States as *Final Fantasy II* for the Super Nintendo Entertainment System. Hereafter referred to as *FFIV*). *FFIV* features cutscenes, story driven dialogue, cliché yet well developed characters, and an antagonist who not only causes the events of the game to occur but also plays a prominent role throughout most of the game though this is not revealed to players until near the end. The antagonist, Zemus, was imprisoned on the moon by his people due to his evil ambitions and desire for power hundreds of years prior to the events of *FFIV*. Yet Zemus' mind is so potent he can control the minds of other beings thousands of miles away and he sets a plan into motion through one of *FFIV*'s characters in order to free himself from his lunar prison. The forces he commands through mind control often seemingly set back the player's progress and force the characters to rethink and re-plan their strategies in order to combat Zemus's evil. And while Zemus does have a presence within *FFIV*'s story, he also fulfills the roles of his 1980s predecessors within gameplay. First, he is the cause of the game's action. Second, his evil intentions and, when players finally meet him, his alien visual design prevents players from identifying with both Zemus and his goals. Third, he resides spatially distant from the player's party and his prison can only be

accessed once players complete the proper requirements. Finally, he is the last challenge player's must overcome to complete the game.

Technology has developed significantly since the early 1990s, but the antagonists of story-driven, single-player games still work similarly to that of *FFIV* within both a game's story and gameplay (Aarseth, "Genre Trouble" 50). This leads to the theoretical portion of this paper, and answering the question: how do antagonists work within both narrative and play? From the development of the antagonist delineated above, one can deduce numerous ways in which the antagonist functions. First, the actions of the antagonist cause both the story and gameplay to happen. An essay by Michael Miller helps to clarify this point. Miller, one of the key designers of the massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) *City of Heroes* and *City of Villains* makes a revealing statement about comic book villains that is applicable to protagonists and antagonists in video games,

> We quickly realized that comic book heroes were different from comic book villains. Heroes, it turns out, are largely reactive. Their stories hinge on something else happening that sets them in motion…Villains, however, are proactive. They make their own stories, crafting the crimes, kidnapping innocents, and all in all giving a hero something to do. (128)

This is definitely the case in single-player, story driven video games. The antagonist breaks the peace of the game's fictional world in some way, and the protagonist must react to that action in order to restore the game world to its original state. In this way, the antagonist is a procedural, and

functional entity that engenders both story and play (Eskelinen, “Game Studies” 37; Murray, *Hamlet* 152) For example, returning to the first *The Legend of Zelda* title, Ganon steals the Triforce of Power and kidnaps Princess Zelda who splits the Triforce of Wisdom into eight pieces to protect it from Ganon. The hero, Link, reacts to Ganon’s actions in order to restore peace to the game world. Thus Ganon sets both the story and gameplay of the game into motion. Second, the player’s goals are defined by Ganon’s actions: recover the eight pieces of the Triforce of Wisdom and save Zelda. The game’s story defines these goals, but they are achieved by prevailing over obstacles within gameplay. Third, the antagonist provides those obstacles that the player must overcome. Though players may not directly engage the antagonist until near the end of a game, antagonists can show their agency by dogging the player’s progress. These obstacles can be NPCs that players must defeat, spatial puzzles they must solve, or they can be obstacles found within the story such as an antagonist gaining control of a resource before the player is able to acquire it. The latter occurs far more frequently in games from the 1990s and beyond, and I will discuss storied obstacles in more detail below. In the case of *The Legend of Zelda*, the obstacles are the NPCs players encounter in the overworld and in the various labyrinths. Finally, once these obstacles are overcome then the last obstacle player’s must defeat is Ganon himself. The battle with Ganon is the climax of the game’s story and also gameplay. In terms of story his defeat leads to falling action

and conclusion while in gameplay he is the ultimate test of the skills players acquired throughout the rest of the game. Ganon's defeat signals the player's mastery over the game's mechanics. There are no skills or items left for the player to acquire and develop, and gameplay concludes along with the story (Murray, *Hamlet* 174).

The Legend of Zelda is an early example, but the only real difference between the above formula in the first *The Legend of Zelda* and video games that have come afterward is the aforementioned storied obstacle. Storied obstacles are plot twists that occur within the game's action that force players onto another path, or to reconsider their approach in completing the game's objectives. Storied obstacles can serve various purposes and can have lasting effects on gameplay and story. First, they prevent the player from achieving the game's goals too quickly and prolong gameplay as a result. As Sébastien Genvo states, "The structure must avoid letting the player succeed too easily" (146). Second, the diversions player's must take to regain lost ground or work through the storied obstacle lead to new play mechanics for players to master thereby making them more powerful and better equipped to tackle future challenges. Third, storied obstacles can help to reemphasize the game's final goal by reminding the player why they must defeat the antagonist and restore order. I will offer some specific examples of storied obstacles in the narratological analysis below.

LUDOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Some of the theoretical implications can already be seen at work in the above discussion regarding how a video game antagonist functions, but I would like to consider them in more theoretical detail. To review, the antagonist has four primary functions:

1. The antagonist is the primary source of the game's conflict.
2. The actions of the antagonist define the player's goals.
3. The antagonist presents players with obstacles to overcome.
4. The antagonist is the final obstacle, and their defeat resolves the conflict.

In the first function, an antagonist disrupts the peace of a game's fictional world, and something is suddenly at stake providing the player with purpose through *ludus*. Henry Jenkins states, "The introduction needs to establish the character's goals or explain the basic conflict," and the disruption of peace by the antagonist—even if it occurs in the game's paratext—provides this explanation (125). The player now has a goal to restore the peace of the game's fictional world and that brings them into conflict with the antagonist. Yet without story what is at stake would be relatively unclear. The story gives shape and meaning to the antagonist's actions as well as the protagonist's response that defines the player's input (Arsenault and Perron 114). Furthermore, the exploits of the antagonist that lead to the game's action are usually storied in nature. To show this at work, I will analyze the more recent game *inFamous*. Though *inFamous* post-dates *The Legend of Zelda* by over twenty years, the four

aspects of the antagonist still apply. First, the antagonist, a man called Kessler, is the source of the game's action when he causes an explosion that imbues the game's hero, Cole, with electrical superpowers and destroys several city blocks of the fictional Empire City that serves as the game's setting. As the story develops the player's goals entail retrieving the device that caused the explosion, defeating other super-human enemies who seized control of the city in the post explosion anarchy, and defeating Kessler who is responsible for the explosion. Kessler is the final challenge for players to overcome in order to prove their mastery of the game's mechanics and conclude the story. At the onset Cole is unaware of Kessler and his machinations, but regardless of his lack of knowledge the explosion gives Cole reason to make his own goals which include finding the person responsible and discovering the reason for their actions. As such, Kessler's actions define Cole's objectives as per the second function of antagonists outlined above.

Next, Kessler provides gameplay obstacles for players to overcome. These obstacles serve various purposes, but primarily the game uses them to increase the player's skill level as well as the strength and number of different powers Cole possesses. This is due to the fact that the player is usually neither skilled nor the player character strong enough to overcome the antagonist at the beginning of the game. The player may or may not actually have a direct confrontation with the antagonist early in the game to show they are not yet ready to tackle that

challenge, but whether the game presents the strength of the antagonist and the weakness of the player through gameplay or story does not change the fact the player is usually not ready to face them when the game begins. Thus one can think of the minor obstacles as *ludus* based challenges that will lead the player to achieving their primary objective in restoring order and balance to the game world. The obstacles, such as NPCs, grow increasingly more difficult as the player progresses through the game. In analyzing difficulty and failure in video games, Jesper Juul states,

> …it is notable that failure is more than a contrast to winning—rather failure is central to the experience of depth in a game, to the experience of improving skills…the experience of learning, adjusting strategies, of trying something new is a core attraction of video games. (“Fear” 250)

The player learns how to defeat the increasingly difficult challenges through the process outlined by Juul, and this navigation of obstacles ultimately leads to the final confrontation with the antagonist who serves as the final obstacle to achieving the primary *ludus* defined objective.

The last battle with the antagonist in a single-player video game is the closest players of the genre can get to true *agon*. The player must face off with the antagonist in an area with clearly defined boundaries, the tension between player and game is ideally at its highest point, and the antagonist will ferociously test all the skills the player acquires throughout the game. But even though the difficulty level may be a step higher than

what the player may have experienced prior to the fight with the antagonist, a well-designed game would not place the player in that situation if it were not possible for them to win. Throughout the game the player has been equal to the task of overcoming the minor NPCs who came before and the antagonist should follow the same pattern by providing a significant challenge while not being too difficult for players to defeat. In *inFamous*, Kessler and Cole faceoff in the crater left by the initial explosion at the game's onset, and, upon entering, the player cannot leave that area. With the help of the storied obstacles discussed below, the tension the player experiences in facing Kessler should be at its highest, and the two are equal in strength. Kessler does possess attacks and abilities that are quite powerful, and may seem more powerful than Cole's, but using them leaves Kessler visibly winded giving the player the opportunity to strike. While Cole may run out of electricity to fuel his attacks, he does not become winded as Kessler does and this serves to equalize the two of them. So while it is not *agon* proper, the player may experience the physical and emotional symptoms of *agon* during the last battle. When (and if in some cases) the player defeats the antagonist, the tension and conflict of the game resolves on two levels. First the *ludus* goals that drive the player throughout the game are finally realized, and this usually signals the end of the gameplay experience as a result. Second, in defeating the antagonist, the player has shown a certain degree of mastery over the game's mechanics. The battle with the

antagonist is the climax of gameplay because it is the final test of the player's skill and understanding of gameplay. Just like any other NPC in the game, the antagonist generally follows a specific, if somewhat randomized pattern. In defeating them, the player shows they recognize the patterns and how best to exploit that pattern to their advantage. After some trial and error, the player will perceive the pattern of attacks that will fatigue Kessler and prepare their counterattack. After a few repetitions the player should have the pattern analyzed in order to capitalize on Kessler's weakness thereby defeating him. Though it is possible that the outcome may result in the player's defeat upon replay, it is not as likely because the player has already become familiar with the antagonist's attack patterns increasing the chances of the player's victory. Were the game *agon* proper it need not necessarily end because the results of the battle would be different each time, but since it is not and the player achieves their goals then the *ludus* must come to an end (Jenkins 125).

The functions of the antagonist as they work in the theory of ludology show how the *ludus* of a single-player video game is created, defined, experienced, and achieved. The antagonist creates and defines the *ludus* based goals, the player experiences *ludus* and even agonistic emotions in working to succeed in those goals, and finally does accomplish those goals with the antagonist's defeat. However, what is missing in all of this is that ludology does not explain context. Why should the player care that the antagonist disturbs the peace of the game world?

Why should the player spend hours, or even days, of their time striving to return the game world to its peaceful state? As pointed out earlier in this essay, Caillois states that *ludus* remains “transient and diffuse” without some sort of conflict to give it purpose and meaning, and story provides the context necessary to keep the game from becoming only a set of increasingly difficult but otherwise meaningless obstacles. This brings us to the application of narratology to the primary functions of the antagonist.

NARRATOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

So far, I have yet to discuss the theory of narratology in any degree of depth. Previously, I only pointed out the fundamental difference between conflict in story and conflict in games in order to define exactly where a single-player, story-driven game falls within the play sphere. Narratology is the study of how stories are told, and, though some literary theorists often link it with Structuralism, others see it as a distinctly separate field with its own critical vocabulary and different aspirations in its application (Barry 222). This theory attracts video game scholars because of the fundamentally different ways in which video games tell stories from other media. Janet Murray and Espen Aarseth, two of the foundational authors of video game scholarship, both note that video games and other types of new media, such as the hypertext novel, do not tell stories the same way books and film do. Aarseth, who has become a prominent proponent of ludology, defines video games as “ergodic literature,” meaning the user must exert effort of some kind beyond the level of interpretation in order for the story to progress (*Cybertext* 1, 64). Murray’s definition is more multifaceted. She claims digital environments are procedural, participatory, encyclopedic, and spatial (71). Most importantly for my purposes are the notions of video games as procedural and participatory texts. Calling a video game procedural refers to the way in which it executes processes and rules. This happens on the level of the game’s code itself, but extends out into the presentation of the story.

Participatory is similar to ergodic in that the story requires input from the user in order to advance. For example, when the player achieves a certain goal, the system will recognize this and execute a command that will lead to the next challenge and so on until the player completes all of the goals (Murray, *Hamlet* 174). Regardless of the differing terminologies defined by Murray and Aarseth, the realization that a single-player, story-driven game is procedural/ergodic indicates a “beads-on-a-string” pattern, and this becomes the primary pattern of the game’s story. The player puts forth effort, the game’s system recognizes this effort, and rewards the player with new tools for gameplay and perhaps a segment of story that then leads into the next ergodic/procedural section (Costikyan 8). Nearly all single-player, story driven games fall under this category.

Despite the difference between video games and other, more traditional modes of storytelling, single-player video games’ stories tend to be very linear. Ken Perlin argues, “Linear narrative forms and games are intended to serve very different purposes. The traditional goal of a linear narrative is to take you on a vicarious emotional journey, whereas the traditional goal of a game is to provide you with a succession of active challenges to master” (15). Despite Perlin’s assertion that linearity and games possess drastically different purposes, linearity lends itself well to the progression of levels and acquisition of items and skills that make up the content of many single-player games. Due to this linearity and the presence of ergodic action, video game stories are often very

straightforward in their presentation (Costikyan 9). Thus we have the beads-on-a-string game format noted above. In a story-driven game, the first “bead” of the string is the event that leads to the game’s action. Typically this occurs prior to the events of the game and may or may not be immediately discernible. Regardless, it defines the ultimate goal of the player. Returning to *The Legend of Zelda*, the game states outright that Ganon kidnaps the princess prior to the player taking control of Link. This clear statement immediately makes the player’s purpose clear in the game. *Final Fantasy IV* is not so forthcoming and the actions of Zemus that set the game’s action in motion are only described late in the game. Nevertheless, the actions of the antagonist within the story define the player’s goals. The fictional representation of what exactly the antagonist does to disrupt the peace of the game world varies from game to game, and what is taken, stolen, kidnapped, destroyed, and so on is not very important in terms of play. Rather it is the act itself that is important because it engenders conflict between the player and the fictional antagonist. Ganon’s kidnapping the princess in *Zelda* is the representation, but it is the act itself that disrupts the peace and creates meaningful play for the player. While there is a difference between the act and its representation, the two are inseparably bound to one another. However, representation can and often does add tension to the conflict while still providing both meaning and the primary objective of the game for players.

The representation of the antagonist works primarily as characterization. What they say and do provides the player with insights as to what kind of character they are, and it is primarily through characterization and action that the antagonist functions. Characterization includes everything from physical attributes, to tone of voice, to deeds performed before and during the events of the game. All forms of characterization inform the player as to the antagonist's goals and motivations from which the player's own goals arise. Returning to the four primary functions of the antagonist outlined above, the action that sets the game in motion should alienate the player from the antagonist in some way. In *inFamous*, Kessler's detonation of the Ray Sphere immediately characterizes him as evil because of the representation; the detonation kills hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of people. Though the cause of the blast is not immediately known to the player, they at least know that whatever force they will be up against is evil and capable of destroying countless lives for its own ends. The representation embeds the goal of play within the story, and the most immediate goals for the player can be summarized with the simple phrases: "find out what happened," and "found out why it happened." Already the representation fulfills the first two primary functions of the antagonist to be the source of the game's conflict and to define the player's goals even if the game defers the antagonist's introduction. The player at least knows that there is some force at work that will oppose them in their search for answers.

The deferment of introducing the antagonist to the player is indicative of video games adopting narrative strategies from other storytelling mediums. The adoption of these techniques has been controversial among game scholars, designers, and gamers alike (Murray, *Hamlet* 64; Rolston 119). The success, or lack thereof, of including narrative techniques borrowed from other mediums varies from game to game and from player to player, and I do not intend to comment on the ability of narrative techniques in making games better or worse. Instead, I will focus on the dichotomy between one of these narrative techniques and its relationship to gameplay.

The intention of designers in employing narrative techniques from other storytelling mediums is to increase the tension player's experience. A very common narrative technique video games make use of is analepsis. Gérard Genette defines analepsis as a retroactive anachrony within a narrative (48). In other words, it relates within the story an event that occurred prior to the beginning of the signifying narrative text. Analepses often take the form of flashbacks revealed to the player as they progress through a game. In *inFamous*, Kessler's reasons for causing the explosion are only described through analepsis. A flashback, such as the one explaining Kessler's intentions, is important because it clarifies the antagonist's goals and this in turn justifies the goals of the player at the game's commencement including finding out what happened to cause the explosion of the Ray Sphere. The flashback explains that Kessler causes

the explosion and the ensuing mayhem in order to turn Cole into a weapon capable of defeating an even more dangerous threat coming in the not too distant future. Oftentimes the goals of the protagonist and antagonist are diametrically opposed to one another in an evil versus good dichotomy. *inFamous* is somewhat exceptional in this sense because the main goal of Kessler is to make Cole stronger so he can face the coming enemy. Cole's objective is also to become stronger though it has the more immediate objective of defeating Kessler because Cole is unaware of the approaching threat. Cole does not know or understand Kessler's purposes until the end of the game, but he seeks strength so that he can be powerful enough to stop Kessler who is the source of the conflict and misery Cole endures. Cole and Kessler's goals are harmonious in a sense, but they go about achieving them very differently.

Returning to the antagonist's primary functions, the third function is to provide the player with obstacles they must overcome. I discussed gameplay obstacles above, but antagonists also provide storied obstacles. Storied obstacles function similarly to Juul's notion of improving skills and experimenting with new approaches except in storied obstacles this takes place on a representational level. That is, the player character is the one who adjusts their strategy within the story rather than the player doing so in gameplay. To review, storied obstacles operate on a few different levels:

1. Storied obstacles prolong gameplay by preventing the player from achieving the game's goals too quickly.
2. The diversions the player-character must make as a result of the storied obstacle lead to new play mechanics for players to master.
3. Storied obstacles increase tension and reemphasize the game's final goal.

Also, all three of the above aspects of a storied obstacle can take place either in separate obstacles or all at once in a single obstacle. There are two major storied obstacles in *inFamous*: Kessler's retrieval of the Ray Sphere before the player, and Kessler's murder of Cole's girlfriend, Trish. The former of the two major storied obstacles lengthens gameplay and gives players the opportunity to continue honing their skills as well as acquire new skills that will help them when finally facing Kessler. Furthermore, this obstacle drastically changes the relationship of Cole to his friend Zeke who betrays Cole with the hope that he can acquire his own superpowers, and this results in altered dynamics between these characters within the game's story. The latter of the two storied obstacles reminds and clarifies why players must defeat Kessler. He is evil and will cause physical and emotional pain to Cole and other characters within the game if he is not stopped. This latter example of storied obstacle increases the tension between the player character and the antagonist and, ideally, gives players emotional motivation to see the game through to its conclusion (Juul loc. 398).

The death of Trish precedes the game's climax and the reason for her death is to bring the tension of the story to its breaking point. After

Trish dies, the only story related objective left for the player is to defeat Kessler. Even if Trish's death does not affect players emotionally, they will understand their avatar's desire for revenge against Kessler and the player is meant to share that feeling in the final battle. That feeling turns the final battle into an emotionally charged conflict where ideals and motivations clash. Though Kessler does not appear at the game's onset, his introduction and characterization throughout the game inform the player of his evil intentions. He is clearly Rehak's "not-I" as seen through the emotional havoc he creates for the protagonist and his defeat signifies the end of that havoc. As in the ludological analysis above, his defeat ends the conflict and all that is left is falling action and conclusion of the game's story. *inFamous* concludes with a cliffhanger ending to prepare players and inform them of the sequel, 2011's *inFamous 2*, so while the tension and conflict of the immediate story is at an end it also sets up the tension and conflict of the sequel.

SUBVERSIVE ANTAGONISTS

The ludological and narratological discussions detailed above on the functions of antagonists in single-player, story-driven games shows that antagonists operate on both levels of story and play. They are the source of the game's conflict, their actions define the player's goals throughout the game, they provide obstacles players must overcome, and the final confrontation with the antagonist is the climax of story and play. However, before concluding this study on video game antagonists, it is important to look at antagonists that subvert these expectations in some way. Even as Rehak explains that the antagonist is "not-I," there are antagonists that blur that distinction. *inFamous*' Kessler is such an antagonist because the revelation of his motives at the end of the game shows that Kessler is actually an aged Cole who failed to stop the greater, approaching threat and uses time travel to return to the past in order to prepare his younger self. So while Kessler definitely remains "not-I" through his characterization in most of the game, the ending blurs the distinction by showing that Kessler "actually-is-I." This encourages players to sympathize, however briefly, with the antagonist and their motives and throws the moral spectrum of the game into question. *inFamous* is far from the only game that features an antagonist to whom players can relate, and there are various ways games can achieve identification with the antagonist in both play and story.

In December of 2006, I played *The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess* for the first time. As the story unfolded I began to notice something peculiar about the game's antagonist, Ganondorf. Prior to the events in the story, Ganondorf was banished to the "Twilight Realm," a separate, parallel universe to the series' usual setting of Hyrule, where he suffers disembodiment. Sometime later, the misery and hatred of a man named Zant awakened Ganondorf's spirit. While incorporeal, Ganondorf tells Zant, "I shall house my power in you...If there is anything you desire, then I shall desire it, too." I realized that Ganondorf uses Zant as an avatar similarly to the way players use Link as their avatar. First, players house their power, or the enabling power of input, into the avatar. Second, the personality of the avatar (however minimal it may be) and the goals defined by the game's rules define the goals of the player (Juul locs. 603-605). Though Ganondorf does regain his own physical body later in the game, Ganondorf's use of an avatar that opposes the player creates the impression that Ganondorf is a substitute for an opposing player. While he is not actually a second player, *Twilight Princess* takes the idea of pseudo-*agon* to a meta-level by portraying Ganondorf as more than antagonist, but as an opposing player competing for control of the game world.

While Ganondorf's use of Zant as an avatar reflects the relationship of the player to their avatar, the skills and abilities he employs when he regains his own body reflect those same skills players have spent the duration of the game developing. As the last function of an antagonist is to

serve as the game's climax and the final test of the player's abilities, giving the antagonist similar abilities in the final confrontation succeeds in furthering the illusion that the antagonist is a second player. The battle with Ganondorf consists of four different phases. The first phase he again uses an avatar by taking control of the body of an unconscious Princess Zelda calling attention to the act of embodiment the player experiences in controlling the protagonist. Ganondorf abandons Zelda, and uses his regained physical form in the second phase of the fight when he transforms into Ganon, a giant boar. Throughout the game, the player hones their own beast form abilities as Link can transform into a wolf with powers and attacks that differ from his human form. Utilizing Link's wolf form is the best strategy for defeating Ganon. In overcoming Ganon, the player shows mastery over the wolf mechanics through defeating an opponent with similar attacks and abilities as though that opponent were an opposing player. The third phase of the fight takes place on horseback. Again, players have spent a significant amount of game-time combating foes on horseback and Ganondorf likewise tests those skills. Once the player unhorses Ganondorf the final phase of the battle is a sword duel, which is the bread and butter of player-controlled combative skills in the *Zelda* series. All of the major game mechanics players have spent the game learning and honing are not only used by the player in the final battle with Ganondorf, but Ganondorf uses them as well. The presence of these mechanics in Ganondorf all serve to create the illusion that he is, at

the very least, a stand-in for a second player not entirely dissimilar from computer-controlled avatars seen in early arcade games. Ganondorf's skills, while similar to those of the player's avatar, differ enough to differentiate him from the player, but are similar enough that players can identify which of the skills they will need to use in order to defeat Ganondorf in each of the phases of the final battle. The control of an avatar, and the possession of similar skills as the player push the pseudo-agonistic relationship between player and antagonist to the limit. It is almost as if all Ganondorf requires is a second player to pick up a controller for the competition between protagonist and antagonist to become true *agon*.

While players may identify with Ganondorf on the level of gameplay, his representation in the story is another matter altogether. There is no question that the story portrays Ganondorf as "not-I." He is power hungry, scheming, selfish, and just all around evil. His physical characteristics also serve to alienate him from players through his massive size and sickly green skin. Yet that does not mean that the stories of other games do not attempt to encourage player identification with the antagonist. Such identification can entail something as small as a brief tinge of sympathy or even agreement with the antagonist's motivations for disrupting the peace and causing the events of the game to happen. The predecessor of *Twilight Princess*, *The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker*, offers an example of the former. Before the final phase of the fight with

Ganondorf in *Wind Waker*, Ganondorf relates his motivations for seeking control of Hyrule. He was born and raised in a harsh desert, and he "coveted" the fair winds that blew across the neighboring country of Hyrule. His desire is something to which players can identify even though they cannot identify with the means Ganondorf goes to in order to fulfill his desire. The affect of this sympathetic portrayal on players will vary, but it does upset the player's expectations of Ganondorf as nothing more than a power hungry maniac by allowing them to understand the reason for his actions. Just as the death of Trish in *inFamous* is meant to increase the emotional tension of the final conflict with Kessler, the knowledge of Ganondorf's motives also stimulates player emotions for the final conflict.

The other end of the spectrum of identification with the antagonist entails more than sympathy through encouraging the player to agree with one or more of the antagonist's motivations for disrupting the peace of the game world. Though my knowledge of video games is far from expansive, I do not think there are many examples of games that do this. Oddly, an early example is *Donkey Kong*. As noted above, the backstory to *Donkey Kong* relates that the simian's owner abused him, so he escaped and kidnapped Jumpman's girlfriend in retribution. Players can identify with Donkey Kong's action, and in truth Donkey Kong only reacts to the actions of his abuser showing that identification with the antagonist can entail a restructuring of the antagonist's four primary functions of play and story delineated above. The only other example I have personally experienced

that presents players with the option to agree with the antagonist's motivations and objectives is the Playstation role-playing game, *Breath of Fire IV* (*BoFIV*).

In *BoFIV*, the player takes control of the character Ryu and his companions as well as, briefly, the primary antagonist, Fou-Lu. Within the game's story, Ryu and Fou-Lu are actually two-halves of a formerly whole deity destined to eventually meet and recombine. As such the two characters' gameplay abilities are very similar to one another with the only real difference being elemental affinities of fire (Ryu) and ice (Fou-Lu) that further demonstrates their antithetical dichotomy. However, the two of them—and the player by extension—experience very different aspects of humanity throughout their separate journeys. Fou-Lu witnesses humanities' capabilities of remorseless murder and destruction, while Ryu experiences humanities' capacity for courage, love, and self-sacrifice for causes greater than an individual. When Ryu and Fou-Lu finally meet at the climax, they compare the memories of their respective journeys and the player has the option of identifying with either Ryu or Fou-Lu through a series of questions posed by Fou-Lu. Fou-Lu's stance is that humanity is corrupt beyond the point of salvation and in order to bring peace to the game world all sentient life on the planet must be destroyed. Should the player, at the end of the questioning, choose the option, "Maybe so…" then Ryu and Fou-Lu merge into a single entity with Fou-Lu's personality being dominant. The player will then take control of the merged Fou-

Lu/Ryu and battle Ryu's former companions. Spatially, the merged form of Fou-Lu and Ryu occupies the on-screen position formerly taken by the numerous enemies the player faced throughout the rest of the game. This spatial transition reflects the player's decision to identify with the opposing ethical position of the antagonist they spent the entire game opposing. It also discards the final function of the antagonist to serve as the final obstacle players must overcome to complete the game through pitting the player against the characters they formerly controlled in a tragic final confrontation. Upon defeating Ryu's friends, the merged Fou-Lu/Ryu exits the area presumably to annihilate the rest of humanity making the player complicit in that destruction. Choosing the option, "You're wrong!" for the final question reaffirms the player's identification with Ryu and his companions, but before Ryu and Fou-Lu merge, Fou-Lu attacks in order to forcefully combine with Ryu. In this case, the final battle consists of the player and their party of characters, including Ryu, defending their moral choice against Fou-Lu. The player fights for the experiences and ideals that Ryu experienced throughout his journey. When the player defeats Fou-Lu, he merges with Ryu, the latter taking the dominant role in this case. The resulting entity proceeds to use his power to make the gods of the fictional world mortal so that humanity will no longer rely on them for guidance. In doing so, the Ryu/Fou-Lu character's hope is that humanity will seek answers and make choices on their own similarly to the player's

opportunity to choose between the differing moral stances of Fou-Lu and Ryu and his companions.

BoFIV is neither the first game nor the last with different endings dependent on choices players make. However, it stands apart from many other games by containing a choice that will switch the player's spatial and moral coordinates within the game, and perhaps even make them question the motivations of their journey (Czege 67; Frasca, "Videogames" 93; Konzack 38). Though it is far from nuanced or complex, the choice the player makes in agreeing or disagreeing with Fou-Lu forces them to stand and fight for whatever choice they have made and see it through to its conclusion. *BoFIV* does not force the clear distinctions between the player character's moral correctness and the antagonist's degeneracy seen in other games onto the player, and though the choices are still very black and white the player will invest more conviction into whatever choice they make. Such conviction increases the game's ability to create tension within the player and make the conflict more meaningful and memorable.

CONCLUSION

In single-player video games, story is a tool developers can use to magnify the conflict and tension players experience while playing a video game. While single-player games may not require story to be fun to play, story can provide meaning and substance to what would otherwise be a series of unconnected, goal-driven challenges. Furthermore, the exclusion of a second player in story-driven, single-player video games leaves a void where *agon* once was that an antagonist is capable of filling even if the result is not *agon* in its purest sense. It is with an antagonist that the game's conflict unfolds and the inclusion of story—however minimal—can add to the emotional tension players experience while navigating that conflict through ergodic means. Antagonists also operate on both levels of story and gameplay. They are open to analysis from both ludological and narratological theoretical perspectives and can even show the possibilities of the two theories working in tandem to help scholars and critics better understand the video game medium. First, the antagonist's presentation in both spatial terms of gameplay and ethical grounds in story alienates players from the antagonist's goals. Next, the antagonist functions on four different levels within both story and play. They are the source of the game's conflict, their actions define the player's goals, they provide obstacles for players to overcome, and serve as the final obstacle in resolving the game's conflict. As noted above, there are some exceptions to the way players do or do not identify with a given game's antagonist,

and such identification can disrupt or change the functions of the antagonist. Yet even these exceptions still serve to increase the emotional tension of the conflict for players. To be sure, some games are more successful in combining gameplay and story than others, and games that are fun to play may have completely inane stories or vice-versa (Costikyan 6). Even so, many video games continue to combine not just story and play, but also music, the execution of code, intuitive player training systems, and so on to create cohesive packages for player consumption.

Just as video games seek to combine a variety of different aspects and mechanics to make a video game, game scholars can likewise use the different theories at their disposal to broaden and deepen our understanding of video games and how they work. In literary studies, one type of theory is not all-inclusive, and critics frequently make use of multiple theories in their textual analyses, and game theories should be no exception. Whether it is ludology, narratology, literacy theories, psychoanalysis, sociological studies, and so on, critics have many tools at their disposal to analyze and understand the video game medium. There will always be some theories that are more applicable than others depending on whatever function or structure critics choose to analyze, but that does not necessarily mean that other approaches become irrelevant or inapplicable. In the above essay, I have shown how antagonists of single-player, story driven video games operate on both levels of play and

story and can be analyzed with two theories whose practitioners spent a long time arguing were disparate.

Were this study of antagonists to continue I could include other analyses from even more theories to deepen the understanding of how antagonists function. For instance, I could argue that the challenges an antagonist provides throughout the game serve as a system of incremental learning that prepares players for the final confrontation with the antagonist (Juul, *Half Real* loc. 999; Gee 141-142). Or I could consider the emotional effects conflict has on the player as a model to understand how conflict works in the real world. Video games continue to be ripe with theoretical possibility, and critics should not limit themselves to a single theoretical framework to understand a medium as multi-faceted and combinatory as video games. The call for common ground among theorists is perhaps more meaningful now as the various scholarly approaches critics may use in studying video games become increasingly isolated even as they differentiate. Just as I have shown conflict is a structural commonality in story and gameplay, others may find similar commonalities that can help make the many disparate approaches to video games studies more congruous. Certainly numerous theoretical approaches require definition before considering them alongside other theories, and there will likely always be room for arguments that only make use of a single theoretical approach. Yet the diverse theories should not remain disparate, apathetic, or even hostile to one another as

considering them alongside one another, if not in synthesis, could lead to surprising results with the potential to redefine our knowledge of the video game medium.

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