

# **Video Games as a New Mode of Storytelling**

Aaron Suduiko

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## Preface: Identifying the Narrative Medium of Video Games

Commenting on the work of art historian Erwin Panofsky, James Conant draws a distinction between the physical innovations that led to film as a medium on the one hand, and the mode of narrative that film was ultimately able to realize on the other hand.

That film could be sculpted into the specific configurations of visual narration constitutive of movies was a possibility of film that it took much time and hard work to bring to light. Only once these possibilities were discovered and mastered did the medium of the movie come fully into existence. The medium of the movie therefore should not be confused with that of film and “the unique and specific possibilities” of that medium cannot be derived from mere reflection on the physical properties of film.<sup>1</sup>

What Conant draws our attention to here is the physical innovation of film did not guarantee the realization of the special sort of storytelling that theorists now take to be characteristic of the medium: there was no guarantee that developing the *physical medium* of film (celluloid film cut and edited together) would thereby instantiate the *aesthetic medium* that theorists think of when they discuss the storytelling of films. To take one example we will explore more deeply in Chapter 1, an interesting (putative) feature of film as an aesthetic medium is that they can easily present narrative without narrators—but nothing about the physical media that constitutes films guaranteed that such a form of narrative would thereby be instantiated.

In other words, Conant thinks that the invention of film (the physical medium) gave us access to something that had always been possible, but had never before been realized: a

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<sup>1</sup> Conant (2009), p. 299.

specific kind of art with interesting, new properties attaching to it (the aesthetic medium). If we then think about film specifically as a mode of storytelling, we can consider how the invention of a new physical medium gave us access not just to a new aesthetic medium, but also to a new *narrative medium*: that is, a new way of telling stories.

The aim of this thesis is to analyze the *narrative medium* of video games that physical media such as PlayStation games, Nintendo GameCube games, and PC games have realized in the last two decades or so. In picking out such a medium, I intend, like Conant, to identify a new mode of storytelling that modern video games have, through “much time and hard work,” brought to light. This approach promises to illuminate video games not as a technological innovation, but rather as a new contribution to the ways in which people can tell and consume stories.

I begin in Chapter 1 by extending the analogy between video games and film: I show that the advent of film as a narrative medium in the 20<sup>th</sup> century challenged preconceived notions of what it means to tell a story, just as video games do now. In Chapter 2, I motivate and present a new ontology of video games as a narrative medium, arguing that such an ontological analysis sidesteps the distracting debate of whether video games are fundamentally games or narratives. In Chapter 3, I argue that existing analyses of the relation in which players stand to the fictions of video games have wrongly assumed that players must either be mere consumers of these fictions or characters in the fiction represented by the proxy of the avatar. By leveraging the new ontology of video games, we arrive at a new analysis of the player’s relation to video game fictions, and put ourselves in a position to appreciate the ways in which unique aesthetic features emanate from this relation.

# 1. What Film Taught Us: Understanding Narrative through Media Innovation

## §1.1 Challenging Narrative Theory through New Media

The question of what it takes to tell a story is surprisingly modern. With storytelling stretching far back in human history, we might expect that our understanding of storytelling had an equally well-established legacy; yet it seems that we have been more interested in the storytelling in the last century or so than ever before. While there are surely many reasons for this trend, I think one particularly interesting reason is that modern innovations in media invite understanding storytelling in a new, philosophically urgent way. As Conant said, these new physical media realize new aesthetic possibilities we might never have considered otherwise.

The interesting thing about new storytelling media is that they have undermined—and indeed, continue to undermine—the notion that we have a firm grasp on what’s more-or-less essential to narrative. To see what I mean, consider first a person reading a novel in the 19<sup>th</sup> century: if we asked her what made that story a *narrative*, she could presumably offer an answer plausibly grounded in what it means to tell a story. “Just as I sometimes relate to my friends a particular sequence of events in order to express something of meaning to them,” she might say, “so too in this novel, someone or other is relating to me a particular sequence of events in order to express something of meaning to me.” While that answer would be too vague to serve as a definition of narrative, it already offers several elements that seem to plausibly link it to the tradition of ordinary instances of narration in everyday life: a *narrator*, a *sequence of events*, an *audience*, and the *expression of some sort of meaning*. And indeed, it might intuitively make sense to suppose that these four elements (at least) are required of any proper narrative.

But now consider a person in the 20<sup>th</sup> century watching a film, and suppose that film doesn't feature anything like voice-over narration. It would seem perfectly natural if he told us that the film "tells a story," or if he referenced the "narrative of the film." But what answer could he give if we asked him what makes that film a narrative? Perhaps he, like the 19<sup>th</sup>-century woman, would point to the particular sequence of events and expression of meaning to an audience; yet it doesn't seem that the film has any *narrator* conveying these events to us. And if it turns out that this film really does represent a narrative without a narrator, then we need to rethink our intuitive picture of just what narrative is, and what its constituents are.

The challenge of film narrating without a narrator is just one example of how the various features and constraints of different narrative media can prompt us to reconsider what sorts of stories and storytelling are possible. Ultimately, my goal in this thesis is to show that video games challenge our notions of storytelling in just this way; by way of introduction, however, it will be useful to consider the variety of ways in which the advent of film and film studies called into question basic assumptions about how narrative works.

I begin the chapter by sketching in further detail the above question of what to do with the apparent lack of narrators in film. This leads us to questions of exactly how film *presents* narrative to its viewers, and how this audiovisual presentation differs from the linguistic presentation of novels. Finally, we'll arrive at questions of exactly what epistemic relation the viewer of a film bears to the "world" of that film's fiction. Along the way, I'll point to analogous ways in which video games, as we shall later see, challenge our extant conceptions of storytelling.

## §1.2 The Search for a Narrator in Film

Before focusing on film, it will be useful to consider what literary theory has to say about authorship and narration in linguistic texts; with this in view, we will more clearly be able to see the problem of narration in film and potential solutions to it.

Wayne C. Booth famously distinguished between the *narrator* and *implied author* in analyzing the formal structure of narrative.<sup>2</sup> The idea here is that there are effectively two “levels” to narration: the act of narration on the one hand, and the *architecture* of the act of narration on the other hand. When we consider the text of a novel as something that is being related to the reader, the narrator is that entity that commits the act of narration, whether the narrator is a character in the events constitutive of that narration or else some omniscient presence outside of those events. On the other hand, the entirety of the text, *including* the narrator who commits the act of narration, implies a certain artist who designed the overall narrative: this is the implied author. The implied author is not the same as the narrator, for the implied author can design a narrator who espouses views that the implied author does not aim to sincerely endorse in her work—e.g., to use Booth’s example, the implied author versus Jason in *The Sound and the Fury*.<sup>3</sup>

One might wonder why we would need to posit an “implied” author over and above the literal, flesh-and-blood author of the narrative. The primary reason why this is so is because the text of a novel may suggest that it was written by someone who sharply diverges from the novel’s literal author in ways relevant to understanding the text; because there is no guarantee that the views that a novel implies belong its author accurately represent the

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<sup>2</sup> Booth (1983), pp. 71-76.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 306-308.

author's views, we need to identify this suggested, or *implied* author, as a theoretical entity distinct from the literal author of the novel.<sup>4</sup>

Booth's distinction between the narrator and implied author of a text puts the difficulty faced by film into sharp focus. For, when initially faced with the problem of finding a narrator in film, one might be tempted to say that the narrator is "hiding" in the same way that many omniscient narrators hide in novels: the narrator presents the events of the narrative without ever directly referencing himself. In other words, the narrator of a film might just be whatever entity is implied within the narrative to be organizing and presenting the various shots that comprise the film to the film's audience. But Booth's distinction suggests that this entity is better understood to be the film's *implied author* rather than the film's *narrator*. Indeed, George M. Wilson offered just this argument in the course of claiming that there is no narrator in film. According to him, the main reason why people suppose there must be a narrator in film is that they recognize that some entity must be responsible for presenting the audience with the organized shots; once we recognize that this is the job of the implied author, Wilson claimed, there remains little reason to suppose that film requires a narrator.<sup>5</sup>

Seymour Chatman offers an intuitive distinction between linguistic storytelling and filmic storytelling that further suggests that film narratives do not constitutively contain a narrator. Chatman claims that, whereas novels make *assertions*, films simply *depict*, pictorially representing events without *describing* those events.<sup>6</sup> If Chatman were right, then we would have *prima facie* reason to believe that linguistic narratives require a narrator whereas film narratives don't: assertions presumably require someone who does the asserting, whereas a

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 318-320.

<sup>5</sup> Wilson (1986), pp. 184-185.

<sup>6</sup> Chatman (1981), p. 124.

world that we see represented pictorially doesn't obviously require a "pictorial representer" in the same way.

Yet there are some reasons to suppose that narrators *do* exist in film. Wilson, in fact, has changed his mind and now thinks that there are narrators in film—albeit narrators in a fairly minimal sense. He is "inclined to support the view that the presence of fictional recounting in a movie presupposes the existence of a minimal narrating agency," but he emphasizes that this presupposed entity that effects the narrative is far less robust than many of the narrators in novels.<sup>7</sup> The implied-author considerations above show just how minimal this notion of a narrator would probably be; I take Wilson's position to be a claim that, if it turns out that narrators *are* essential to narrative, then films are not thereby *disqualified* from the category of narrative: the fact that they fictionally convey and recount events implies a narrator as much as a novel does.

Broadly speaking, the debate surrounding narrators in film seems to turn on the question of whether narration is even intelligible without a narrator. Returning to the notion of narrative inspired by the act of oral storytelling, it doesn't make sense for a story to be told without someone telling it. This, I take it, is the thought behind Wilson's minimal narrator: it seems that films really can tell a story, and so there ought to be some entity conceptually doing the *telling*. Yet wherever the cards ultimately fall on the question of narrators in film, it is evident that film at least raised the question of whether narrative demands narrators. We will see in the next chapter that video games similarly challenge a basic assumption about narratives—namely, that authors are always the agents responsible for fixing the content of narratives. Ultimately, we will also see that the storytelling of video

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<sup>7</sup> Wilson (2011), p. 134.

game implies a kind of “minimal narrating agency” congenial to that at which Wilson gestures in film.

### §1.3 The Presentation of Fictional Worlds through Film

Whether or not there is a narrator in film, the medium raises another difficult question about its capacity for narrative: exactly how do films present audiences with access to their fictional worlds? There is clearly no way in which we straightforwardly, literally *see* the fictional characters and their environment, no matter that we remark colloquially how surprised we were to “see” Darth Vader cut off Luke Skywalker’s hand in *Star Wars: Episode V – The Empire Strikes Back*.<sup>8</sup> If we instead *imagine* ourselves in the fictional world, watching the events of the film unfold, it’s not clear what perspective we are thereby assuming within that imagined world: we might suppose that we are imagining ourselves from the perspective of the camera, but surely we don’t imagine ourselves standing in between Vader and Luke as Vader, inches away from Luke, tells him that he is his father. So, if we think that (fictional) narrative gives us some kind of access to some sort of fictional world, we need to hammer out exactly how this is possible in the audiovisual medium of film.

Yet the more one tries to hammer out just how the audience has access to the film within the context of their imaginings, the more one runs up against a paradox: it seems necessary to these imaginings that we imagine ourselves both within the world of the film and not within the world of the film. For the features of film as a medium are irreducibly *experiential*: unlike the linguistic representations of novels, it seems in the case of visual film content that, for us to be imagining the film’s fiction with the content contained on the screen, we must be imagining ourselves in that world, seeing things from a certain perspective. For the content of a film shot, even within the context of the filmgoer’s

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<sup>8</sup> Kurtz & Kershner (1980).

imaginings, already contains facts about the filmgoer within those imaginings: we could only see the shots we see in films if we occupied a certain perspective in space relative to the other objects represented in the shot.<sup>9</sup> Yet at the same time, as the above example of Vader and Luke shows, we just *don't* imagine ourselves as being spatially situated within the world of the movie in the positions that the film's visual content implies. This is still more obvious in the case of aerial shots that pan over vast landscapes from above: we do not imagine in these instances that we are soaring through the air, surveying (for example) the entirety of the Misty Mountains in a matter of seconds.<sup>10</sup> To claim otherwise would be to introduce a bizarre, fantastical phenomenology into the imagined life of the filmgoer—one that simply does not align with how we imagine the worlds and stories of films. And so we are left with an apparent paradox: the visual content of films implies that we imagine ourselves situated within their fictional worlds, and yet both the experience of filmgoers and the narrative implausibility of the viewer fictionally occupying the position of the camera in film fictions suggest that we do not imagine ourselves as situated within these fictional worlds. How can we resolve this paradox and make sense of the access that viewers fictionally have to the worlds of films?

Bernard Williams wrestles with this paradox through a comparison with theater. When one sees an actor playing Othello onstage, Williams claims, one sees Othello without being a part of the world to which Othello belongs. Williams offers various examples to drive our intuitions here; for instance, though we see Othello strangle Desdemona, we would not thereby claim in our autobiographies to have seen someone strangled.<sup>11</sup> Williams also

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<sup>9</sup> Thus the content of a film shot only “contains facts about the filmgoer” in a *de dicto* sense: obviously perspectival features of a film's visual content don't say anything about the individual Aaron Suduiko, though I may be a filmgoer watching that film.

<sup>10</sup> Osborne & Jackson (2001).

<sup>11</sup> Williams (1966), p. 36. Although the focus of the current chapter is film, Williams' analysis raises a pressing question: why are the challenges of film *new* challenges to narrative; would not the ancient art of theater have

directly addresses film: he claims that, though we see events in films from a certain point-of-view that is often disembodied, it seems often wrong to say this is our point-of-view in the sense that we as viewers are fictionally occupying a particular position within the world of the film.<sup>12</sup> Williams argues that we should think of visualization in the same way as we should think of these examples: “even if visualising is in some sense thinking of myself seeing, and what is visualised is presented as it were from a perceptual point-of-view, there can be no reason at all for insisting that that point-of-view is of one within the world of what is visualised [...] We can, then, even visualise the unseen.”<sup>13</sup>

We have seen the considerations that push Williams to say that the filmgoer sees the world of the film without being a part of that world; yet his analysis highlights the paradox of imagining film worlds without resolving it. As Wilson observes in his critique of Williams, it is a “daunting task” to comprehend the nature of a disembodied perspective, which Williams says we often take when imagining the fictions of film.<sup>14</sup>

Wilson’s own answer to the paradox of viewing fictional film worlds is that the content of film narratives is *transparent* to the film’s audience in the sense that the medium of film acts as something like a window: through the film screen, the viewer can make-believe that he is looking into another, secondary world—the world in which the film’s fiction takes place.<sup>15</sup> In making sense of these views-into-another-world, he emphasizes the audience’s

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posed similar issues about narrators, epistemic access, etc.? In a survey of narrative theory, Wilson (2011) offers one possible answer: theater, from the time of Aristotle onward, has been seen by many as *reenactment* rather than (strictly speaking) *narrative*. “Many theorists,” he writes, “following Aristotle, maintain that theatrical performances of stories do not as such involve narration, contrasting stories that are conveyed by *telling* or *recounting* of the fictional action with the stories that are transmitted by *mimesis*, or by histrionic imitation. On this conception, genuine narration requires an articulated, perspectival telling of the story, a situated recounting of the relevant event” (p. 20). Thus, on this conception, the advent of film’s edited image track—a visual, articulated, perspectival telling of a story—really did seem to raise for the first time the narrative problems we are discussing.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 36-37.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, p. 37.

<sup>14</sup> Wilson (2011), p. 8.

<sup>15</sup> Wilson (1986), pp. 54-57.

appeal to “explanatory coherence”: as the viewer imagines looking into this other world, she must constantly evaluate the content of views of that world with which she are presented in order to establish various sorts of explanatory relations between these views.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, because we can typically assume that narratives provide the answers to their questions of greatest significance, the lack of an explanation of such questions can encourage the viewer to shift the explanatory paradigm by which she is trying to understand the film.

Wilson’s analysis can be frustrating in its use of metaphor: one imagines some sort of science-fiction apparatus allowing one to look into another world or time, but it is hard to apply this idea as a resolution of the paradox discussed above. He seems to merely reframe the paradox rather than resolving it: we might just as easily ask how, on his view, the fiction of film contains a viewer who both has visual access to the film’s world yet does not exist in that world. Worse, in his more recent work, Wilson seems to simply punt on the possibility of resolving this issue: he instead points out that it is often the case for readers and consumers of fiction generally that they imagine worlds and narratives while leaving *indeterminate* the question of exactly how that narrative, fictionally, is transmitted to them. In defense of this indeterminacy, he quotes correspondence with David Hills: Hills remarks that “*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*...represents itself as a carefully crafted 300 pages memoir by its title character, a barely literate young man getting ready to light out for the territories because the prospect of any work that requires him to sit still terrifies him.”<sup>17</sup> He also quotes Hills as citing the view-screens of *Flash Gordon*’s fictional world to similar effect: in the case of these apparatuses, Hills says, “perspectival visual access to a distant scene is afforded by means of an image whose structure is somewhat photograph-like, but the process giving rise to these images is not imaged to involve, and in some cases may be

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p. 40.

<sup>17</sup> Wilson (2011), p. 44, footnote 28.

actively imagined not to involve, the processing of causal inputs collected at the point in space on which the image is centered.”<sup>18</sup>

There are three principal problems with Wilson’s punt to indeterminacy here: one with each of his two examples, and one with his overall approach. Each problem provides insight into the challenges of film narrative and how, methodologically speaking, we ought to approach an analysis of narrative in light of innovations in new narrative media. First, apt though the *Huckleberry Finn* comparison may seem, it actually obfuscates the film-specific paradox with which we began this section. Our problem with understanding viewer’s epistemic access to film worlds was not that the form of the representational vehicle seemed implausible or inexplicable (as is the case in *Huckleberry Finn*) but rather that the representational vehicle was *epistemically paradoxical*: it apparently requires us to imagine ourselves both inside and outside of the world of the film’s fiction. We also noted that this is a *film-specific* problem because it derives from the visual content of film being experiential, which is disanalogous with the written novel. Thus the comparison with *Huckleberry Finn* ends up trying to answer an especially challenging aspect of a particular narrative medium (film) by instead answering a quite general question of how to best understand inexplicable narrative representations.

Second, the analogy Wilson draws between his theory and *Flash Gordon* either relocates the initial paradox, or else fails as an analogy. In the first instance, I think that we should find *Flash Gordon* view-screens just as puzzling as the initial paradox of viewing fictional movie worlds: exactly how are people supposed to be able to see distant images without causal inputs at the location of those images? Something’s being science fiction does not automatically discharge all of its explanatory burdens, and we already saw that Wilson

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, p. 48. Also quoted from Hills’ correspondence with Wilson.

leans (rightly) elsewhere on the notion of explanatory coherence in understanding fictional worlds and narratives. Thus we may want to simply say that the explanation of access to events through view-screens is incomplete in the same way that Wilson's explanation of viewer access to film worlds is.

But suppose on the other hand that it really is the case that the causal dynamics of the view-screen, within the conceit of the fiction, are inexplicable or indeterminate—we might imagine a case like the scene in *Looper* where Bruce Willis' character tells a younger version of himself (in a remark the implied author presumably intended to apply to the audience) not to worry about precisely how time-travel works in the story.<sup>19</sup> In that case, it just seems wrong to call this situation analogous with the problem facing epistemic access to film worlds. Within fictional worlds, it is obvious that many facts are indeterminate, sometimes inconsequentially so with respect to the overall narrative, and sometimes crucially so—for example, the inconsequential indeterminacy of whether Sherlock Holmes had an even number of hairs on his head, and the crucial indeterminacy of whether Leonardo DiCaprio's character was dreaming at the end of *Inception*.<sup>20</sup> Yet it isn't clear what justification we would have for believing that such indeterminacy obtains in such mundane real-world matters as imagining the fictions of film. While we might argue that the fact-of-the-matter about some things in reality really is indeterminate, it seems we should be able to give a clear enough account of how we are able to see and understand the fictional worlds of films. More to the point, if seeing film worlds really *does* involve an indeterminate or inexplicable process, we can't justify this indeterminacy on the level of the narrative *medium* by analogy to the altogether different indeterminacy that arises within the context of *particular narratives*.

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<sup>19</sup> Bergman, Stern, & Johnson (2012).

<sup>20</sup> Thomas & Nolan (2010).

This leads to the overall methodological problem with Wilson's claim that the process by which we see into the worlds of film fictions is indeterminate: as I said at the outset of this discussion, this claim is a punt. But the reason why I take this to be a punt points to a broader principle that will guide us not only in our current discussion of film, but also as we broach the subject of video game narrative: namely, I take it to be the case that, since consumers of narrative experience no fundamental obstacle in imagining the worlds of these narratives and understanding the representational content presented to them, we ought to be able to explain how it is that the representational vehicles of narrative provide people with access to their fictional worlds. In other words, we need an adequate explanation of the relation in which the consumer of a narrative stands to the fictional world of that narrative. This is why I think we should not be satisfied with an account of access to fictional worlds in *any* narrative medium that claims the means of access are ultimately inexplicable or indeterminate: such an account is incomplete and fails to do justice to the ease with which we clearly do access the fictions of that medium—not through anything phenomenologically science-fictional, but rather in a way that captures the ordinary experience of engaging the medium in question.

Thus far in this section, we have seen only that film narrative poses a challenging paradox regarding how a viewer can access fictional film worlds, and that there appear no simple solutions to this paradox with satisfactory explanatory clout. However, some philosophers take a radically different tack, arguing that the paradox is ill posed. Daniel Morgan, for instance, claims that the entire debate of epistemic access to film worlds only gets off the ground by asking the wrong questions. On his view, it is a mistake to give explanatory primacy to a film viewer's epistemic relation to the film's fictional world and camera: to do so, he claims, fails to capture the fact that camera position and movement are

primarily used by filmmakers as an *expressive device* in service to the broader narrative of the movie, rather than as an epistemic anchor for the viewer.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, it is often the case that film viewers do not experience the movie as seen through the camera's lens: rather, the camera and its movement work to express the perspective of various characters in the film, whether or not these characters are on-screen at any given moment. Thus the expressive intent of shots and filming techniques should be given explanatory primacy, not epistemic relations between viewer and camera.

In the background of Morgan's argument, I think, is the question of what justifies us in posing to film narrative this epistemic question that we would never pose to a book. We do not seem troubled by the task of epistemically relating ourselves to the imagined worlds of novels; why, then, must we force this question with films? Indeed, this line of critique rightly point out what we discussed earlier: the apparent urgency of the epistemic-access question in film comes from the fact that we appear to be *seeing* the events of the film in an experiential way. Perhaps, Morgan suggests, this experiential aspect of film content is just a red herring: we need to understand it by first understanding the expressive effects that it supports, rather than presupposing the explanatory primacy of epistemic access. The case for this critique will be made even stronger when we turn to video games and find that the medium intrinsically motivates similar questions of epistemic access in a much more central way than film does: without an account of epistemic access, we'll find ourselves unable to adequately explain the narratives of video games.

Beyond epistemic access, however, it *is* clear that fictional worlds are presented differently in films than in novels. Even if we end up disagreeing with Chatman on the issue of film's capacity to assert propositions, he is surely right about a closely related point: film

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<sup>21</sup> Morgan (2016), pp. 239-240.

narrative cannot describe objects in the discrete, selective way that linguistic narrative can.<sup>22</sup> The content of a single shot of a chair, for example, could affirm countless propositions describing that chair, whereas a written description of that chair will assert a far smaller set of propositions, corresponding to the sentences constituting that description. The result, Chatman notes, is that films cannot pick out particular properties as salient in the same way that novels can. Yet, as we just saw above, the film has at its disposal camera techniques to express and make salient various aspects of the narrative; so it seems that the point here is that each narrative medium has its own set of quite different tools with which to represent fictional worlds. We shall see that video games, too, have their own tools for representing fictional worlds.

#### §1.4 Inviting the Audience Inside

We observed in this chapter that the innovation of film raised challenges to the supposed necessity of a narrator in narratives, the means by which the audience of a narrative accesses the world of that narrative, and the ways in which narrative media can represent fictional worlds. Notice, in closing, a unifying thread to these three challenges of film: *each of them is a challenge to how we conceive of the audience's relationship to a narrative*. The challenge of narrators arose because we initially supposed some entity must, in some sense, *tell the audience* the narrative; yet film seems to “show” the audience in a way distinct from that familiar telling. The challenge of epistemic access arose because *the audience* seemed to be relating to the fictional world of a film in a new and paradoxical way: “seeing” the world despite this being theoretically impossible. Likewise, the challenge of how narrative media can represent fictional worlds arose because of the special *experiential* quality of film's representational content. Film does not challenge the concept of narrative in a vacuum, isolated from the

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<sup>22</sup> Chatman (1981), pp. 120-124.

consumers of narrative: rather, it challenges narrative insofar as audience experience is part of narrative.

This is the overriding theme that will guide us as we turn to video games: crucial to the medium's development of the concept of narrative is that it invites the audience *into* the narrative in ways that are deeper and different than what we just saw in the case of film. The interactivity and possibility inherent to video games ground a type of storytelling in which the consumer of a video game becomes a central part of its fiction without relinquishing the status of audience member—as if you were both acting in a play and sitting in the mezzanine, watching your own performance. The unpacking, clarification, and defense of these claims will occupy us for the remainder of this thesis.

## 2. Narration in Play: The Storytelling of Video Games

### §2.1 Motivating a New Ontology of Video Games

We saw in the previous chapter that the advent of film as a narrative medium challenged basic features of prevailing conceptions of narrative media, from the necessity of a narrator to the epistemic relations between audience and fictional world. The overarching trajectory of this thesis is to show that video games, properly conceived, radically challenge notions of narrative media in analogous ways. Most centrally, as I argue in Chapter 3, video games provide the first instance of a medium for which it is a constitutive feature that the consumer of the narrative also plays the role of a causally efficacious fictional entity. From this central feature emanate new, rich possibilities in how narrative can be represented.

But before we can arrive at an argument for a particular relation between a video game's player and the fiction of that video game, we need a framework for understanding just what a video game *is*. More specifically, we need to know in what sense video games are a *narrative medium*: that is, the kind of abstract entity that can represent narratives. While my remarks thus far have taken for granted that video games are a narrative medium, this is by no means assumed in either the literature or casual discourse on video games. In fact, one of the first debates in video game studies, a debate that persists today, concerns whether video games are fundamentally games (i.e. *ludic*) or fundamentally stories (i.e. *narrative*).<sup>23</sup>

Roughly, *ludologists* argue that video games are fundamentally games by endorsing some variation of one or more the following claims: (i) in video games, narratives are only superficially used to contextualize or advertise the gameplay; (ii) analyzing video games as a narrative medium overlooks or misconstrues the elements of video games properly conceived as *game* elements; or (iii) narratives have one or more essential feature that video

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<sup>23</sup> Ryan (2006) provides a useful synopsis of the debate on pp. 181-203.

games as a medium lack. So, for instance, Aarseth claims that “When games are analyzed as stories, both their differences from stories and their intrinsic qualities become all but impossible to understand,” thereby endorsing versions of (i) and (ii).<sup>24</sup> *Narrativists*, in opposition to ludologists, argue in various ways that the game elements of video games do not threaten video games’ status as narrative media, typically by showing that the features of video games are compatible with theories of narrative that they take to be independently plausible. Thus Robson and Meskin subsume video games under a Waltonian account of fiction and make-believe, thereby analyzing the medium as a mode of interactive narrative,<sup>25</sup> while Ryan argues that video games fit a broad theory of narrative as something that instantiates some conjunction of various cognitive states.<sup>26</sup>

Though the ludic/narrative debate may initially seem well motivated, it is ultimately a distraction that obscures the ways in which video games radically expand the storytelling possibilities available to narrative media. The reasons for this are twofold.

First, most video game theorists tend to understand ‘video games’ or ‘computer games’ as some large, ontologically heterogeneous set of objects that feature user input and corresponding computer-generated audiovisual output. Thus we see Murray arguing that *Tetris* is narrative because one can tell a story about it,<sup>27</sup> and Ryan arguing that both the simulation-focused video game *The Sims* and the more overtly story-driven video game *Half-Life* are both narrative in virtue of simulating mimetic ludic actions.<sup>28</sup> That this group of

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<sup>24</sup> Aarseth (2004), p. 362.

<sup>25</sup> Robson & Meskin (2016).

<sup>26</sup> Ryan (2006), Chapters 1 & 8.

<sup>27</sup> Murray (1997), p. 144.

<sup>28</sup> Ryan (2006), pp. 194-195. By “overtly story-driven,” I do not mean to beg the question against Ryan with respect to what constitutes story or narrative in video games. At this point, I appeal only to the intuitive distinction between open-ended games that represent worlds without a chain of events that delineates a beginning, middle, and end to the game on the one hand, and games that do have such a chain of events on the other hand. Later we will see that the “story-driven” locution is apt because it picks out the ontological kind that is paradigmatic of video game narrative.

objects is so promiscuous makes it relatively easy for ludologists to claim that “video games” are only unified as a set insofar as they are a kind of *game*, whereas narrativists end up drawing on implausibly broad analyses of what it means for something to be narrative, and performing baffling maneuvers like narratively interpreting *Tetris*.

The second problem with the ludic/narrative debate derives from the first. With narrativists trying to account for the narrativity of a broad, ontologically heterogeneous set of objects termed ‘video games’, the interesting ways in which video games constitute a new narrative medium end up washed out in an effort to provide suitably broad, game-apt analyses of narrative. A prime example is the widespread assumption that video games, modulo special cases of voice-over or linguistic mechanisms, do not have narrators. Both ludologists and narrativists tend to take this assumption as given; if it arises in discussion, the only debate is whether the concept of narrative requires narrators or not. Jesper Juul, for instance, claims that video games, despite representing fictional worlds, do not represent narratives because narratives must be presented “by way of discourse,” where this presumably gestures at the requirement for some sort of narrator in narrative.<sup>29</sup>

Given the lively debate in film studies as to whether the ontology of film includes narratives, it is surprising an analogous debate would not arise in video game studies. The natural explanation for why no such debate has arisen is, I think, the red herring of the ludic/narrative debate: by counting too many kinds of thing as video games, theorists preemptively block discussion of how certain groups of clearly narrative video games complicate or develop traditional narrative concepts, such as that of the narrator. As further evidence for this diagnosis, I will ultimately show that once we define ‘video games’ as an

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<sup>29</sup> Juul (2005b).

ontologically clean way, we find that the ontology of video games implies a narrator-like theoretical entity.

The aim of this chapter, then, is to clarify what objects I have in mind by the term ‘video game’. As we have just seen, however, this requires more than a mere definition of terms: in order to avoid the two main problems of the ludic/narrative debate, we need a clear and principled ontology for a certain subset of the broader “video game” set: a subset that functions as a narrative medium in ways consistent with other canonical narrative media, such as novels and films. Only then will we be able to see how the special features of video games, rather than suggesting competing ludic and narrative conceptions, actually combine to make a new narrative medium possible. Thus this chapter concerns itself with setting out the ontology of the narrative, single-player video game. I first detail each element of this ontology, comparing and contrasting it with the ontologies of other narrative media in order to better situate the special aspects of video games at the most fundamental level.

Some clarification is in order regarding the scope and intent of this project. I do not claim that the set of objects I hereafter term ‘video games’ are the only philosophically interesting members of the broader set of what we typically call ‘video games’—that claim is patently false. Rather, as will become clearer in the ontology, I take the objects I call ‘video games’ to possess a foundational structure that naturally builds upon the structures of other narrative media, such as novels, film, and theater; this feature allows us, by analyzing this particular set of video games, to better grasp how the special features of the medium complicate our preexisting notions of narrative media. Other games, such as life simulators (something like *The Sims*<sup>30</sup>) or games that multiple people play together at once (e.g., *World of*

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<sup>30</sup> Maxis (2000).

*Warcraft*,<sup>31</sup> *Second Life*,<sup>32</sup> *Halo*'s multiplayer modes<sup>33</sup>), muddle the data with other pressing concerns that aren't pertinent to the task at hand (for instance, the social and ethical domains of games in which multiple players can interact with one another in a fictional world). My hope, though I will only gesture at it here, is that my analysis of this particular kind of video game will pave the way for more robust analyses of other kinds of video game, with this ontology serving as a groundwork for storytelling in the broader set of what people typically call 'video games'.

## §2.2 The Ontology of (Narrative, Single-Player) Video Games

For convenience, I will use 'video games' throughout my arguments to refer just to those objects for which I provide an ontological basis in this section. However, given the ambiguity between kinds of objects generally called 'video games'—not to mention the sometimes interchangeable and sometimes distinct uses of 'video games' versus 'computer games'—it is worth providing another name for the video games with which I am concerned at the outset. A rough-and-ready label for these video games is 'narrative, single-player video games'. As we will see, the 'single-player' and 'narrative' conditions are not sufficient to pick out only those video games that I have in mind, but the name does serve to highlight the continuity of the set with other narrative media, both in terms of the storytelling focus and in terms of a singular person as the basic "unit" of audience.

Building on the spirit of this nomenclature, the presentation of this ontology focuses on capturing similarities and differences between the basic constituents of video games qua narrative medium and those of other narrative media—specifically, those of literature, film, and theater. Thus we will consider: *authorship* in video games; *audience* in video games;

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<sup>31</sup> Blizzard Entertainment (2004).

<sup>32</sup> Linden Lab (2003).

<sup>33</sup> Bungie (2001).

*characters* in video games; *events* in video games; *fictional worlds* in video games; and *narrators* in video games. By the end of this analysis we will know what a video game is qua narrative medium. We will understand the philosophical import of the pre-theoretic claim that video games are “interactive,” and we will be poised to leverage this interactivity to better understand the relations in which the players of video games stand to the fictions of video games, a subject that we will broach in the next chapter.

### §2.2.1 Narrative Terms

We need a few terms in place to disambiguate meanings of ‘narrative’. First, I do not intend to present necessary and sufficient conditions for narrative itself in this thesis. Rather, I appeal to what I take to be an intuitive understanding of the concept: *narrative* is a sequence of events, arranged in a particular order, and presented from a certain point-of-view. Perhaps we would also want to say that narrative conveys expresses some sort of meaning, and specify that meaning in one way or another; details such as these can be filled in according to the reader’s preferred aesthetics, and my arguments will still stand. The one other term we need in order to begin discussing video games is that of a *narrative object*: this is the vehicle that represents narratives, and that is a particular instance of a *narrative medium*. So, for example, the novel *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*<sup>34</sup> is a narrative object: it is expressive of a particular narrative, and is itself an instance of the narrative medium of literature.

### §2.2.2 Authors, Players, and Onlookers

Narrative objects ordinarily stand in an asymmetric relation between two sets of real, flesh-and-blood people: the producers and consumers, or *authors* and *audience*, of the narrative object. These sets may contain one or multiple members. *Ulysses* is an example of a narrative

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<sup>34</sup> Márquez (2003).

object with one author, James Joyce;<sup>35</sup> television shows with vast production teams are examples of narrative objects with multiple authors. When I sit and watch a play with no other theatergoers in the audience, the narrative object has an audience with one member; when I sit and watch that same play surrounded by other theatergoers, that narrative object has an audience with multiple members.

Video games, like other narrative media, have author sets and audience sets. Their author sets work in the same way that other author sets do: there may be a singular author or multiple authors of a video game, and these are fixed when the narrative object is created.<sup>36</sup> In practice, most modern games (similarly to films, but to an even greater extent) require vast teams of people to develop team, and so their author sets will tend to be large; the exact members of that set will just be whomever we decide to count as responsible for designing the narrative elements of the game (elements to be made precise in the remainder of this chapter). Interestingly, however, whereas other narrative media have one type of audience set, video games have *two*. Members of one set are *players*, whereas members of the other set are *onlookers*.<sup>37</sup> Understanding why this distinction arises in video games motivates the theoretical significance of the apparent “interactivity” of video games.

With media such as literature, film, and theater, it is unproblematic to add an audience member to the audience set of a narrative object without thereby fundamentally precluding or altering the capacity of the other members of the set to consume that narrative object. The presence of more audience members may bring new considerations to the act of consuming a medium—e.g., the social dimension of choosing which jokes to laugh at when

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<sup>35</sup> Joyce (1986).

<sup>36</sup> I am ignoring in this analysis the practice of modifying, or “modding,” video games, where enthusiasts alter the code of a game to reformat or insert new material into an existing video game. That this process operates on a video game implies that the process is not a part of the ontology of a video game.

<sup>37</sup> Newman (2002) draws a similar distinction, though he takes onlookers to be more central to video games as a medium than I do.

one is watching a comedy with other people—but another person watching a television show will not fundamentally change the way in which other audience members consume the show by looking at the screen, seeing what it projects, and hearing the audio track accompanying it. But video games don't work like this: they invite a consumer to engage them by picking up a *controller* and actually manipulating the contents of the narrative object. Video games give players something to *do* in order to advance their narratives, and they do not allow for more players to simply join in and exert that same kind of control. Thus if another person arrives to join in an act of consuming a video game, they do so in a *fundamentally* different way than the player does: instead of manipulating the game, this newcomer instead watches as the video game develops in accordance with the player's inputs. In this way, the newcomer is an onlooker, consuming the narrative more passively than the player does, in a way that depends on the player's antecedent engagement with the narrative object.<sup>38</sup>

In most narrative media, the basic “unit” of narrative consumption involves a single audience member rather than multiple audience members: consuming a narrative is something that we can do on our own and that doesn't change fundamentally when more people are introduced into the audience set. But the addition of audience members *does* fundamentally change audience consumption of video game narrative: based on the number of players a game supports and how many people are already playing, an  $n^{\text{th}}$  person added to the act of consuming a video game could be either a player or an onlooker. So while a single-player model of consuming video games mirrors a single-reader conception of consuming a

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<sup>38</sup> The player and onlooker sets of a video game can often interact dynamically over the course of playing a video game: for example, two friends engaging a video game might pass the controller back and forth at various intervals, thereby changing who is player and who is onlooker. While this is a common and interesting feature of video game consumption, I take it that it can be built out of the basic ontology that I provide and therefore need not be considered further. (Thanks to Marco Torres for drawing my attention here.)

novel and a single-viewer conception of consuming a film, the addition of players or onlookers introduces ontological variance. Moreover, a single player is a necessary and sufficient audience for the narratives of a video game to be consumed; an onlooker is neither necessary nor sufficient for the consumption of these narratives. Thus, both in order to retain a singular, cohesive ontology of video games, and to articulate an ontology that only captures the essential features of the narrative medium, I limit the set of players to one and set of onlookers to zero.

### §2.2.3 Characters

Narratives generally contain *characters*, fictional representations of people. Narrative objects can represent characters in radically different ways based on the medium of which the object is an instance: novels represent characters with words, whereas plays represent them with flesh-and-blood people (i.e. actors). But at bottom, all of these media represent the same kind of thing when they represent characters.

Video games feature two ontologically distinct kinds of character: *non-player characters* ('NPCs') and *avatars*.<sup>39</sup> NPCs are fundamentally *reactive* to the actions of the avatar in a way that has no parallel in the other media we have considered, and which leads to the surprising result that *events* in video games—the basic interactions between characters and environment, from which narrative is constructed—fundamentally depend on which character in the event is the avatar. I call this result *event-relativity*.

The simplest and most intuitive analysis of avatars and NPCs just says that the avatar is the character in the video game that the player controls via her controller, whereas NPCs are the characters over which the player does not (and indeed cannot) exert control via her

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<sup>39</sup> The term 'non-player character' is intended to contrast with the 'player character', which is a colloquial term for 'avatar'. This is unfortunate nomenclature given my claim that the player plays a fictional role that is distinct from the avatar, but I bow to convention.

controller.<sup>40</sup> On such an analysis, the player can interact with NPCs and influence them via her avatar, but her direct control (via the controller) is limited in domain to the avatar. Because video games in our ontology have only one player, we will take it to be the case for now that video games have just one character designated as the avatar—though we will see later that this is just the most basic case.

Thus far, nothing I have said about video games suggests a deep difference between NPCs and avatars. We know that the control afforded to a player differentiates kinds of audience members (players versus onlookers), but this does not obviously imply a similar difference in kind between player-controlled characters and other characters. Perhaps, one might think, the player’s control only affects how people consume the fictional worlds of games: this control does not affect the constituents of those fictional worlds themselves.

Yet a closer analysis reveals such a position to be untenable. Intuitively (to be made rigorous in the next section), the interactive nature of video games rests on the possibility of the player using her control to realize more than one possible event: were it the case, strictly speaking, that only one event-output were possible regardless of the control-input provided by the player, then the player would simply be pushing buttons while watching a film progress. Because the player’s apparent control in a video game centers on the avatar, this means that, within the context of the “world” that the avatar and NPCs inhabit, outcomes of events depend on the actions of the avatar, as determined by the player. This structure of event-avatar dependence leads to a surprising conclusion distinguishing video games from other narrative media: in video games, changing the perspective through which events are

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<sup>40</sup> In the next chapter we will see that this “simplest analysis” is deeply mistaken because the player controls neither NPCs *nor* avatars, but this view is dialectically useful in motivating event-relativity. When we have the right analysis of the player’s relation to the fiction of video games on the table in the next chapter, we will also end up needing to slightly revise event-relativity; nonetheless, the main argument here holds, and is useful to consider as a first step in our ontology of events in video games.

conveyed to the audience—i.e. changing the avatar—changes the fundamental events of the narrative. This is event-relativity.<sup>41</sup>

Event-relativity, like many philosophical concepts, is made most vivid by way of an example for which it explains how something has gone very wrong. This example considers the video game *Dishonored*, which ends up falsely implying that two distinct events are a singular event by ignoring event-relativity.<sup>42</sup>

*Dishonored* tells the story of a man, Corvo Attano, who serves as the Royal Protector of an empress, Jessamine Kaldwin.<sup>43</sup> At the beginning of the video game, Jessamine is assassinated, and Corvo is framed for the murder. With Corvo as the avatar, the narrative of the video game focuses primarily on clearing Corvo's name, exposing and neutralizing the true usurpers of the throne, and restoring the proper heir to the throne.

The video game features a *choice system* that applies valences to possible actions that the player can have Corvo take, aggregates those valences over many actions taken, and uses the overall valence to determine the course of events that transpire as the player plays through the video game. The choice system, called the 'chaos system', gives the player options as to how she can have Corvo complete each of his missions in the game, some of which options are 'high-chaos' (assassination, sounding alarms, causing panic, etc.) and some of which are 'low-chaos' (stealth, neutralizing targets without killing them, maintaining law and order, etc.). When the player makes more high-chaos choices, the world of the game ends up becoming darker, bleaker, and more totalitarian; when the player makes more low-chaos choices, the world ends up looking brighter, more ordered, and generally optimistic.

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<sup>41</sup> Here I am loosely appealing to intuition regarding the connection between avatar and perspective on the world of the game; this connection will be made robust in Chapter 3.

<sup>42</sup> Arkane Studios (2012).

<sup>43</sup> I am speaking somewhat loosely here and below with I describe "*the story*" and "*the narrative*" of a video game: as I discuss in the next section, a single video game will contain many possible narratives. What I describe as a video game's 'narrative' simpliciter is more precisely defined as 'the events in a video game's possibility structure that are common to all possible narratives of that video game'.

At one point in the narrative of *Dishonored*, Corvo finally locates and confronts Daud, the assassin-for-hire who actually murdered the empress. If the player so chooses, Corvo engages Daud in combat; if Corvo defeats Daud, then Daud asks Corvo to spare his life. The player then has a typical high-or-low-chaos choice: she can either have Corvo kill Daud, or have Corvo spare Daud. Crucially, the player's choices about what to have Corvo do are the sole determinants of whether Daud lives or dies.

After *Dishonored* was published, its publisher released two pieces of *downloadable content* ("DLC") for the game: *The Knife of Dunwall* and *The Brigmore Witches*.<sup>44</sup> DLC for video games can take many forms; these two DLCs constituted extra, shorter narratives that supplemented the main game's narrative. They featured narratives that supposedly took place during the time of *Dishonored*'s narrative, in the same world as *Dishonored*'s narrative; instead of designating Corvo as the avatar, however, the DLCs designated the assassin Daud as the avatar, allowing the player to see and play through what Daud was doing elsewhere in the world, in the time leading up to his confrontation with Corvo.

The DLCs, up until their last moment, are independent of *Dishonored* in the sense that none of the events of the DLC is also an event in *Dishonored*: although the two narratives are stipulated as taking place in the same world at the same time, they follow different characters in different places. However, the DLCs conclude with the same confrontation between Corvo and Daud that features in *Dishonored* itself. Crucially, by the conceit of the narrative, this confrontation in the DLC is supposed to be *the same event* as the confrontation that happened in *Dishonored*.

The DLCs use the same chaos system as *Dishonored*, and it is this chaos system that determines the outcome of the Daud/Corvo encounter at the end of the DLCs. If the player

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<sup>44</sup> Arkane Studios (2013a) and (2013b).

had Daud take mostly low-chaos actions throughout the DLCs, then Corvo spares Daud; if, on the other hand, the player had Daud take mostly high-chaos actions throughout the DLCs, then Corvo executes Daud. But now we have a problem: a player can easily play through *Dishonored* and kill Daud as Corvo, then play through the DLCs making low-chaos choices as Daud and subsequently see Corvo spare Daud. Yet the event in the DLCs is meant to be *the same event* as the event in *Dishonored*.

The problem arises, as I said at the outset, because *Dishonored* and its DLCs ignore event-relativity. By changing the avatar from Corvo to Daud, thereby changing the causal structure of events from being determined by Corvo to being determined by Daud, it becomes possible that different events is realized as a result of the two versions of the Corvo/Daud confrontation. In the former case, the event is determined by the choices that the player makes about Corvo; in the latter case, the event is determined by the choices the player makes about Daud. It might be the case that Corvo ends up killing Daud in both *Dishonored* and the DLCs, but there is no *guarantee* that the same event will constitute the encounter in *Dishonored*'s narrative and the DLCs' narrative.

The lack of such a guarantee signals a radical departure from other narrative media. We tend to assume that, in cases where the events of a story are retold through the perspective of a different character, there is a basic sense in which the events themselves remain fixed. Bal refers to 'events' in this basic sense as the 'fabula', or 'mere events', of a narrative.<sup>45</sup> Certainly events might be colored, interpreted, or even perceived differently based on this perspective shift—that's undoubtedly part of what makes such a retelling interesting (e.g., Kurosawa's *Rashomon*<sup>46</sup>)—but these interpretative transformations are predicated upon the basic facts-to-be-transformed being held fixed. Event-relativity shows

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<sup>45</sup> See for instance Bal (2009), pp. 182-195.

<sup>46</sup> Jingo, M. & Kurosawa, A. (1950).

us that, as a result of the distinct ontologies of avatars and NPCs, this assumption of basic, perspective-independent facts in narrative is unwarranted in the case of video games.

#### §2.2.4 Narratives, Possibility, and Worlds

Consider a naïve dilemma. If narrative objects do anything, one might think, they tell a determinate series of events, fixed by the authors. But if video games really do give players control over their events, then their events can't be predetermined by the authors: as we saw above, that would render video games nothing more than someone pushing buttons during a film. So how is interactive narrative of the kind we see in video games possible? What kinds of stories can their authors tell, if not stories of determinate events?

This naïve dilemma shows that we need to make more precise the notion of how events are actualized in a video game. For there is in fact a perfectly good sense in which video games contain narratives of determinate events, fixed by their authors, and there is another perfectly good sense in which players make events the case within a video game. Distinguishing and clarifying these senses will allow us to get clear on the “worlds” of video game fictions and their characteristic possibility; it will also pave the way for us to identify the role of a narrator in video games and relation between players and the fictions of video games.

The bedrock structure of possibility in video games is more robust than the kinds of possibility in other narrative media—or indeed in real life. This is because video games are designed so that, by consulting the narrative object itself, we can determine the full scope of what is possible in the fiction of the video game, and what would have been the case had the avatar done otherwise at any point in a video game's narrative. The possible events in video games are structured in chains of events that branch from one another at mutually exclusive disjunctions of events. So, given some sequentially ordered chain of events  $\{p, q, r\}$  in a

video game, the video game will contain events  $s$  and  $s'$  such that  $s$  and  $s'$  are mutually exclusive, and  $s$  and  $s'$  can both be realized from  $r$ . For example, given the chain of events up to the confrontation with Daud, either <Corvo killed Daud> or <Corvo let Daud live> are realizable, and the two are mutually exclusive.<sup>47</sup>

As the player guides her avatar through the game, she will end up realizing one of the distinct possible chains of events that itself constitutes a *narrative*: i.e. events arranged in a certain way, from a certain perspective, with a beginning, middle, and end, etc. These chains of events may take many shapes: some games may branch into different endings based on the player's choices; some games may have chains of events that branch into different chains that eventually converge on a single ending. Some chains of events may widely diverge from one another, such as chains of events that lead to entirely different endings, while some may be barely distinguishable from one another, such as a pair of chains of events in which the only difference is that the player moved her avatar slightly faster in one chain than in the other. Though the realization of many events will depend on the player's choices, many others will be stochastic (in this context, determined by a random-number generator). For example, the amount of damage an avatar deals in a given attack on an enemy—no doubt an event—is fixed by such a random-number generator.

The crucial feature of video games that makes their possibility “robust” is that a player, upon completing one of the game's narratives, can go back and play the video game again, make different choices, get different outcomes to stochastic events, and realize various other possibilities within the narrative of the video game. Thus video games have the resources to provide determinate answers to counterfactuals within any one of their narratives, such as: ‘What would have happened had Corvo not killed Daud?’ Such

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<sup>47</sup> I use these brackets throughout the thesis to indicate sentences that represent events.

counterfactuals are difficult to establish in other media; in a novel, for instance, a narrator can say that “Had  $x$  not obtained,  $y$  would have obtained,” but it is not obvious that novels (except, perhaps, for choose-your-own adventure novels) can support entire chains of alternative events that match the actual narrative in length, as video games can.

In coming to understand how video games tell stories interactively, we have reached a remarkable distinction between video games and other narrative media: in video games, *authors do not determine the narrative*. Recall that narratives are chains of events, constructed from a certain perspective, arranged in a certain way, etc.: this is what emerges in the video game based on the choices of the *player*, and which therefore can be different in any given act of playing the video game. This is why the video-game specific term for ‘narrative’ is ‘*playthrough*’, rightly suggesting that the narrative of a game on any occasion is fixed by the player’s actions.

Authors of the video game, instead of determining the narrative, determine the *possibility structure* of the video game: that is, the network of all possible events that could constitute part of a narrative in the video game, and the various ways by which the player (and/or stochastic processes) can *actualize* these events—i.e. cause them to be part of a playthrough of the video game. Video games require that we posit a new ontological feature, the possibility structure, in order to account for the fixed fictional possibilities that the player can actualize as they engage the narrative object. The exact nature of this possibility structure will have to wait until next chapter, when we have on the table a new analysis of the player’s role in video game fictions, a role that is intimately and foundationally linked to the possibility structure. At this point, we can understand the possibility structure as an abstract space in the fiction of video games, which contains all possible events that can be actualized to form narratives within that game, together with relations that structure and govern the

orders in which these events can be actualized. While each narrative contained in the possibility structure can be thought of as representing a “fictional world” in the same way that the narratives of films and novels do, the possibility structure itself is no such fictional world: it is an abstract domain of possible fictional worlds.

Once we have posited the possibility structure, we are forced to reconceive what it means to “author a narrative.” In narrative media such as novels and film, for an author to create a narrative object entails that they determine that narrative that the object represents. However, narrative object and narrative come apart in the medium of video games: the author creates and determines *the set of all possible narratives* (i.e. the possibility structure) in the narrative object, but it is the *player* who determines the video game’s narrative on the occasion that that particular player engages the video game.

### §2.2.5 The Implied Author

Beyond the flesh-and-blood author of a narrative object, we also have Booth’s *implied author*, first introduced in the last chapter. Like other narrative media, video games have implied authors: as we consume a video game, it is perfectly apt for us to ask what sort of author would have designed such a video game. However, there is one interesting way in which the implied author of a video game is quite different than the implied author of narrative objects belonging to other narrative media: because the authors of a video game are responsible for creating the possibility structure within the video game, a player must know the entirety of what is possible in the video game in order to correctly infer the implied author; playing through only some subset of the video game’s possible events will be insufficient to infer the implied author because these events are only representative of one small section of the possibility structure the author designed. So, for example, a player might only play through the events of *Skyrim* in which the avatar joins the Dark Brotherhood, a guild of assassins-for-

hire; this might incorrectly lead them to infer that *Skyrim*'s implied author is dark, nihilistic, sadistic, etc., whereas a complete picture of the game's possibilities would reveal that the player is able to have the avatar align itself with a wide variety of guilds and factions with a wide array of moral codes.<sup>48</sup>

### §2.2.6 Towards Narrators and the Agency of Players

The above ontology suggests a natural place for an analogue to the sort of conceptual narrator that ludologists and narrativists assume has no place in video games. Just as narrators express the written narrative of a novel to a reader, and just as they (putatively) act as a minimal agent recounting narrative in film, so too is there such an entity that “expresses narrative” in video games, in a certain sense: the key is that, from within a narrative of a video game, this entity expresses to the player features of a video game's *overall possibility structure* outside the scope of the actual narrative. I think that others have failed to consider this analysis because they have observed that players determine the events of a playthrough, supposed that the events of actual playthroughs are the only sorts of things that narrators could retell in video games, and then (rightly) reasoned that a narrator cannot rightly “retell” something that the player is actively telling.

We can instead say that the narrator is the fairly minimal agent that, from within the narrative of the game, conveys to the player information about the set of possibilities in the game. And indeed, the need for such a theoretical agent is much more pressing in video games than it is in film: the player, in engaging a video game, only ever directly “sees” the narrative that she is actualizing, yet she is also able to recognize that there are many possibilities in the video game, and can act so as to actualize those possibilities. So we need a fictional entity within the actual narrative of the video game expressing the broader

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<sup>48</sup> Bethesda Game Studios (2011). Thanks to Marco Torres for drawing my attention to this feature of implied authors in video games.

possibility structure to the player, if we are to make sense within the fiction of how events transition from possibility to actuality.<sup>49</sup> And indeed, this concept allows us to make sense within the fiction of features such as text boxes that tell the player which controls will allow her to make her avatar execute various actions: on my view, these constitute part of the theoretical entity that expresses the possibility structure of the video game to the player (e.g., ‘The player can make it the case that the avatar  $\Phi$ s by pressing the ‘A’ button’) from within the player’s playthrough.

We do not yet have all the pieces we need to give credence to the above talk of the player “actualizing possibilities” in video game narrative. Thus far, I have only paved the way for an intuitive ontological position for a narrator in video games: the in-playthrough presentation of the possibilities in video games is just as plausible a theoretical locus for narrators (if not more so) as the presentation of an edited film reel. This comes with the following conditional: if the player is really able *within the context of the fiction* to be causally efficacious in this way, then it had better be the case that there *is* such a narrator to link up the player’s agency with the rest of the video game’s fictional world in the way described above—otherwise, we wouldn’t be able to explain how the player can fictionally recognize the elements of the possibility structure external to her playthrough of the video game.

It certainly seems that the player *causes* the story of a video game to proceed, but it is by no means obvious that this causation is fictional: it could, for example, just be the case that the player hits buttons like a reader turns pages, “causing” the story to advance but not causing things within the fiction of the story. Thus our next step is to demonstrate that the player really does have fictional causal efficacy, a discovery that will invite both narrators and players into the fiction of video games.

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<sup>49</sup> Note that, especially given theater, it’s quite plausible that narrative does not conceptually require narrators, and so video games would not be *disqualified* as narrative objects if my argument fails here.

### 3. Making Events Happen: The Status of the Player in Video Game Fictions

#### §3.1 Players and Avatars

Ordinary language surrounding avatars and players suggests that avatar in video games act as *proxies* for players: it is often the case that, when one plays a video game, one refers to oneself as undertaking the actions that one’s avatar undertakes. It is through this linguistic practice—at least in part—that the notion of the player somehow assuming the identity of the avatar has gained theoretical ground in the literature. So, for instance, Robson & Meskin have taken this element of discourse between players and onlookers as the primary evidence for their theory that “[the player’s] decisions not only make certain things fictional concerning her avatar but also—*given that her avatar is fictionally her*—make many of the same things fictionally true about her.”<sup>50</sup>

Our primary argument for the claim that video games are [self-involving interactive fictions—fictions that, in virtue of their interactivity, are about those who consume them—] is an a posteriori one based on the way players and observers of video games typically describe events. If Bill were playing *Marvel vs. Capcom 3* and used Spider-Man to defeat Galactus, then it would not seem out of place for Sally, having observed these events, to exclaim incredulously, “You beat Galactus by swinging at him on your web!” Here it is clear that Sally is joining in the make-believe game in which

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<sup>50</sup> Robson & Meskin (2016), p. 168. Emphasis mine.

Bill is Spider-Man and performs those actions which Spider-Man performs on screen.<sup>51</sup>

Gamers and game theorists both tend to assume that the avatars of video games directly represent players within the game's fiction in some way. So Rune Klevjer claims that "[the] relationship between the player and the avatar is a prosthetic relationship; through a process of learning and habituation, the avatar becomes an extension of the player's own body,"<sup>52</sup> and James Newman claims that "[the] player utilises and embodies the character [i.e. avatar] in the gameworld," where this embodiment is defined by "sets of capabilities, potentials and techniques offered to the player."<sup>53</sup> Mark Bell defines an avatar as "any digital representation (graphical or textual), beyond a simple label or name, that has agency (an ability to perform actions) and is controlled by a human agent in real time," and that therefore "function like user-controlled puppets."<sup>54</sup> Juul says that when an avatar does some action in a video game, then the player, "by extension," does that same action.<sup>55</sup> These and other theories all take as their starting point the claim that players act on the fictional worlds of video games *through* the avatar in some direct way, and thereby set the terms of the debate: for them, the puzzle is to uncover just what the avatar-player relationship consists in, such that the actions of player through the avatar proxy are adequately explained.

The aim of this chapter is to show that there is something deeply wrong with this widespread assumption that the avatar is a proxy for the player within the fiction of a video game. We will see that the player is best understood as both the audience of a video game and as playing a fictional role within the video game—a fictional role that is distinct from the

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, p. 169.

<sup>52</sup> Klevjer (2006), p. 10.

<sup>53</sup> Newman (2002).

<sup>54</sup> Bell (2008), p. 3.

<sup>55</sup> Juul (2005a), p. 183.

avatar, and which I call the *fictional player*. This feature of video games radically diverges from other narrative media, and it is this feature from which many of the other most narratively salient features of video games emanate.

### §3.2 The Ontological Requirement of the Fictional Player

We saw that video games have events that are fictionally *possible* and events that are fictionally *actual*: the former constitute the possibility structure, and the latter constitute a given playthrough. But this raises a problem that our ontology in the last chapter did not address: how, within the fiction of the game, is it the case that events belonging to the game's possibility structure are made actual? Given that both the possible events of a video game's possibility structure and the actual events of the video game's narrative are part of the video game's fiction, we need some sort of entity that, *within the context of the fictional world*, actualizes events. Notice that this question uniquely arises in video games *because* of the possibility structure: there are fixed fictional alternatives in the possibility structure to whatever events obtain in a given playthrough, and so it stands to reason that there must be a fictional explanation for why X happened rather than Y, where X is an event in a playthrough and Y is an alternative to X that is contained in the video game's possibility structure. I will consider what I take to be the four most plausible candidates for what this causally efficacious entity could be: the avatar, the player, the player in the role of a character, and the fictional player. We will ultimately see that only the fictional player can serve this actualizing role while also accommodating and explaining the central features of how video games tell stories.

The "obvious," intuitive analysis of how possible events in video games are actualized is that the *avatar* actualizes events through her actions: the player controls the avatar, but this control does not actually extend into the video game's fiction. The fiction-

grounded explanation for how events happen in video games, on this view, is just that the avatar makes them happen. This, I take it, is the prevailing view not only pretheoretically but also theoretically: avatar theorists assume that only the avatar acts as a causal agent within the fiction of the game, and then debate with each other precisely how the avatar, as the player's fictional proxy, represents the player within that fiction.

No doubt, this intuitive analysis—what I'll call the 'intuitive avatar proposal', or IAP—has its merits. First, as Robson and Meskin point out, the proposal theoretically tracks our common language and thinking about video games. *Prima facie*, it does appear as if the players of video games are external to the video game's fiction, and that they control an agent (i.e. the avatar) that *does* act within the fiction. And if this turns out to be the right analysis, then it has the added benefit of establishing a tight link between player and avatar, which can serve as the focal point for further theory: if we know that the avatar is the player's agential representative in the video game's fiction, then we can begin to debate just what sort of proxy relationship this is (which, again, is exactly what avatar theorists *do* debate).

However, IAP fails to account for four key data about how video games function as a narrative medium: I call these the *explanatory* datum, the *variability* datum, the *exploratory* datum, and the *epistemic* datum. I will examine each in turn and argue that an account that fails to account for all of these data, regardless of its intuitive appeal, is inadequate as a method of understanding video games as a narrative medium. This will motivate us to look for alternatives to IAP in order to explain the fictional actualization of possible events.

### §3.2.1 The Explanatory Datum

The **explanatory datum** about video games is the following: in any given video-game narrative, many of the avatar's actions are inexplicable if we appeal only to the avatar's

epistemic set. A key type of case in which the explanatory datum obtains is *failing-and-repeating*: the iterative process of the player finding “success conditions” for proceeding through a video game’s narrative.

There are often conditions for “failure” in a video game in the following sense: it is possible for an avatar to die in the course of a video game’s narrative, e.g. by failing to kill some particular enemy, at which point the player will have to return to some particular earlier position in the playthrough (often the last point at which the game was saved) and try to find a way to proceed beyond that point without the avatar being killed. Failing-and-repeating is essentially a process of the player learning the various possible outcomes of the game, iterating various commands to the avatar until they find success conditions for proceeding through the narrative. This means that players often use information from their failed attempts in order to ultimately succeed: perhaps the player learns-by-death-of-the-avatar in *Skyrim* that a large, disproportionately powerful monster lurks behind a hidden but avoidable corner; subsequently, she proceeds by directing her avatar to avoid that corner. Let’s say the player named her avatar “Icarus” (some video games, such as *Skyrim*, allow players to determine certain features of their avatars, including names): we would surely be licensed to ask, as we would when making sense of any such narrative, “Why did Icarus avoid that corner as he progressed through the area?” The obvious answer seems to require that we cite the monster that previously killed Icarus, but surely Icarus, as he (fictionally) lives and breathes, doesn’t know about that monster. One might instead try to construct some story about how Icarus “had a bad feeling” about the corner, or how he simply avoided it by dumb luck, but these *ad hoc* explanations willfully avoid the apparent, actual reason why Icarus did not go explore the corner: the player knew about the monster waiting for Icarus.

If the player's knowledge and causal agency have no place within the fiction of video games, as IAP claims, then avatar actions such as those arriving from failing-and-repeating will be inexplicable within the context of the narrative. Of course, a proponent of IAP proposal might try to avoid the explanatory datum altogether by saying that the request for explanation, as I originally stated it, is ill posed: rather than ask why *Icarus* avoided the corner, we should ask why *the player* avoided the corner. Indeed, this could be another place where Robson and Meskin would appeal to ordinary use of language: when an onlooker sees a player direct an avatar in a certain way, they typically ask the player, "Why did you do that?" The player might respond in our example, "Oh, I explored that corner before, and a monster killed me." Yet we surely can't be expected to take this language as a literal account of what is going on in the case. Understanding the player to be imagining herself *as* the avatar when playing a video game does seem to require that the answer to our initial question be something like "The monster previously killed me," but this just demonstrates how implausible the view becomes when its implications are laid bare: even if players identify strongly with avatars in various ways, they surely do not play through video games while imagining that they are beings with the (often narratively implausible) ability to infinitely reincarnate and try out different actions every time they die, a la Bill Murray's character in *Groundhog Day*.<sup>56</sup>

### §3.2.2 The Variability Datum

The **variability datum** of video games is the following: video games, even given the ontology I have defended, possess a wide array of diversity in the exact makeup of their ontological constituents. In particular, a video game may have just one avatar that the player apparently controls throughout the narrative; a video game may have the player apparently

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<sup>56</sup> Albert & Ramis (1993).

control different or multiple characters throughout the narrative; and a video game may even have the player apparently control some *object* that is not an avatar (e.g., a racecar). An adequate analysis of video games must be generalizable to the extent that it accommodates this apparent diversity.

It is not apparent that IAP can adequately explain the diversity of avatars and objects a player can apparently control in video games. Because the proposal tightly links the avatar to the player via some proxy relationship, cases in which the player can control multiple avatars or control something other than an avatar are rendered mysterious. For instance, consider Robson & Meskin's analysis of *wipEout*, a video game in which the player controls a racing craft rather than an avatar.<sup>57</sup> Robson & Meskin claim that players engage the fiction by imagining themselves as drivers of the racing craft, effectively importing the concept of avatar into a game that lacks an avatar.<sup>58</sup> They motivate this analysis by appealing to the language players use when discussing the game, saying things like “[I am] moving at a breakneck speed,” which they think speaks in favor of their imaginative view in which it is fictional of the player that she is driving the racing craft, rather than a view that analyzes players “as detached coauthors of a story about racing” according to which the player simply makes things true in the fiction.<sup>59</sup>

Robson and Meskin's commitment to the claim that *it is fictional of the player that she is* the avatar in a game leads them to stipulate an avatar in a game that lacks one. An analysis of avatar-player relations that claims the player *embodies* the avatar would probably have to make a similar move, on pain of saying that the player is able to use a racing craft as a proxy

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<sup>57</sup> Psygnosis (1995).

<sup>58</sup> Robson & Meskin (2016), p. 168.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.* They attribute the “co-author” view to Grant Tavinor.

body.<sup>60</sup> Such accounts, too, will have to explain how players, so tightly connected to avatars, are sometimes able to “jump around” to multiple avatars, or to control multiple avatars at once—these are worries than are analogous to philosophers of film who stipulate the camera present the perspective of a hypothetical observer, and thereby take on the burden of explaining how a hypothetical observer is able to jump instantaneously across space and time in many quick cuts of the camera.<sup>61</sup> Thus while the IAP theorist could conceivably explain and accommodate the variability datum, she would have to introduce a great degree of potentially *ad hoc* complexity into her theory of avatar-player relations in order to do so—complexity that would most likely detract from its intuitive appeal, which we have identified as one of its primary theoretical virtues.

### §3.2.3 The Exploratory Datum

The **exploratory datum** of video games is this: a typical part of the act of playing a video game and consuming its narrative is the act of *exploring* the possibility structure of the video game. To see what this exploration consists in, suppose that you are playing *Dishonored* and arrive at the confrontation with Daud. When he asks Corvo to spare his life, you deliberate and decide to have Corvo kill him. However, you are curious: what would have happened had you instead directed Corvo to spare Daud? As we saw in the last chapter, counterfactuals in video games are *verifiable* in that the player can actually go back and see what would have happened in a counterfactual fictional scenario like the one with Corvo and

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<sup>60</sup> Not everyone resists this commitment: Klevjer (2006) thinks that “[in] computer games, the vicarious body can take different forms; a character, a racing car, a rolling ball, a camera, a gun” (9). But I take it for the purposes of this thesis that such a view won’t withstand scrutiny because we can’t coherently embody something so distant from a human form as, e.g., a gun. Even if Klevjer’s view works here, it still must face all the other objections raised regarding IAP’s inability to accommodate the four central data I discuss.

<sup>61</sup> See, for instance, Reisz (1966), pp. 213-214, on such a view that Ernest Lindgren espouses: “On a great many occasions it is necessary to cut to a shot taken both from a different position and facing in a different direction from its predecessor [...] Clearly, there can be no analogous experience in real life. No simple theoretical justification of such cuts is possible by comparing the film treatment with normal experience.”

Daud. Because video games allow the player to *save her game* at certain points, cataloguing certain locations in a given playthrough to which she can return at will, it is easy for a player to, after having Corvo kill Daud, *load the save file* that marks the moment before she reached the Corvo-Daud confrontation and see what happens in the case where she doesn't have Corvo kill Daud. Such an act of using save data to explore mutually exclusive events in a video game's possibility structure is a case of exploring the game's possibility structure.

It makes no sense to attribute this sort of possibility-exploration to Corvo, as IAP might suggest: it is not fictional of him that he goes back in time and explores various possibilities in his world. The only other option for the view, so far as I can see, is to dismiss such exploration as somehow "external to the narrative." Yet to take this stance would be to throw out as noise a general feature of how players play video games, and how the narratives of those video games unfold over the course of a playthrough.

### §3.2.4 The Epistemic Datum

The **epistemic datum** is a datum about the nature of avatars: namely, despite the fact that the player apparently controls many aspects of the avatar of a video game, the avatar nonetheless (like any other character) has its own narratively significant beliefs, desires, and history in which the player often does not share.<sup>62</sup> Video game narratives often crucially depend on the player *not* sharing the avatar's epistemic set; a theory of avatar-player relations ought to be able to explain this datum.<sup>63</sup> The following example will help illustrate how video game narratives can deliberately separate avatar beliefs from player beliefs.

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<sup>62</sup> We can talk of the player sharing in an avatar's epistemic set, imagining herself as having that epistemic set, and so on; the datum is theory-neutral with respect to how a player identifies with an avatar's epistemic set when she does so.

<sup>63</sup> Though the epistemic datum and explanatory datum are distinct from one another, they are importantly related in the sense that they both capture ways in which video game narratives depend on players and avatars believing, desiring, and learning different things. We might therefore think of these two data together as capturing *epistemic asymmetries* between avatars and players in video game fictions.

*Spec Ops: The Line* puts the player in control of Captain Martin Walker, the leader of a Delta Force team sent into a post-disaster Dubai to evacuate hostages.<sup>64</sup> As he proceeds through his mission with his team, he begins to go insane from the violence of war, hallucinating that a long-deceased Colonel is maliciously instigating insurgents and forcing Walker to do horrible things. The player, however, only discovers at the end of the narrative that Walker was insane in this way: a different character ultimately reveals the truth about Walker's insane behavior.

One interesting and forceful aspect of this narrative is that the player progresses through the narrative despite it being obvious that her avatar is committing increasingly horrifying crimes against humanity: dousing refugees with white phosphorus, murdering other American soldiers, and so on. It turns out that the avatar was insane, driven mad by war—but the player wasn't. The disturbing reality to which the game's fiction points is that the player soberly chose to continue playing the game, even as she was soberly aware of the avatar's wrongness.

IAP can't capture this core aspect of the narrative: you can't capture the player's problematic decision to keep playing in the face of her avatar's atrocities by saying to the player, "You imagined that you were acting in justifiable ways, but it turns out that the person as whom you were imagining yourself (i.e. the avatar) was insane." Such an analysis fails to describe the dichotomy between the player's beliefs about her choices on the one hand, and the avatar's insane interpretation of those same events on the other hand. If we keep the player outside of the narrative, only analyzing the avatar as the causal agent, then we aren't licensed to talk about the player's beliefs as narratively relevant, and so we miss the point of narratives like *Spec Ops* that centrally concern the player's choices.

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<sup>64</sup> Yager Development (2012).

Though *Spec Ops* is only a single case, the point here is quite general: avatars are characters with fictional histories and mental lives, and the fact that a player can control some of the avatar's decisions does not entail that the player has access to these histories and mental lives. That this lack of access can become narratively significant shows that an account of causal efficacy in video game narrative must accommodate and explain the general phenomenon.

At this point another objection to my complaints against IAP becomes relevant: I am not, one might claim, analyzing avatars *qua* avatars; rather, I am analyzing them *qua* characters in the narrative. I think the best way to make sense of this objection is as follows. Some people think that 'avatars', properly understood, are entities within a video game that are *mere* proxies for the player's agency, not colored or constrained by any characterization by the video game itself. On one natural reading of him, Newman endorses something like this view when he claims "that the level of engagement, immersion or presence experienced by the player – the degree to which the player considers themselves to "be" the character [i.e. avatar] – is not contingent upon representation."<sup>65</sup> While he mostly limits his discussion of 'representation' to the physical attributes of avatars, his claim that avatars are basically sets of capacities and abilities makes it plausible that 'representation' will also cover aspects of the avatar such as beliefs and desires.

On such a view as Newman's, the characters that the player controls don't always behave like avatars proper, and some video games have avatars that are more "avatar-like" than others. Avatars, for instance, that say things that the player has not decided they will say are thereby failing to act as avatars; *cutscenes*, sequences in video games in which the player has no control over the avatar or anything else, are seen as prime examples of such "un-

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<sup>65</sup> Newman (2002).

avatar-like” action. Someone with a view like Newman’s might therefore claim that my analysis is misguided because I am ignoring the fundamental features of avatars and instead insisting on analyzing them via the superficial ways in which video games characterize avatars.

Such a position is not tenable. Even in video games that feature what these theorists would consider “pure” avatars, the avatars are still clearly characters in the ways I describe. *Skyrim* is a representative example: in this video game, the player is able to design and name her avatar, and she has exceptionally free reign over how to develop her avatar’s various abilities. The game does not have any “cutscenes” as typically understood, and the avatar only says what the player decides the avatar will say. Yet for all this, the avatar is still a character in the ways I describe. *Skyrim*’s story begins when the avatar has been arrested and is about to be executed; the avatar presumably has a set history leading up to this event, over which the player can exercise no authority. Moreover, despite the fact that the player is able to choose everything that the avatar says, she is not able to make it the case that the avatar says anything whatsoever: in a typical conversation with an NPC, whenever it is the avatar’s “turn” in the conversation, the player will be able to choose what the avatar will say from a list of three or four options. These various options constitute and exhaust the possible things that the avatar could say at that moment; presumably, that these options and none others are the things the avatar can express both says something about the avatar’s *psychology* and plays a determinate role in the *capacities* of the avatar (namely, the capacity to make certain speech-acts but not others). Thus even in *Skyrim*, a paragon case of the “pure” avatar, we have player-independent characterization centrally defining the avatar and establishing an epistemic divide between player and avatar.

### §3.3 Towards a New Analysis: Making the Player Narratively Significant

Despite IAP's coherence with the ordinary way we discuss and conceive of video games, it faces substantial problems as an account of how avatars and players relate to the fictions of video games: it fails to accommodate and explain four core data of the medium to which it pertains.<sup>66</sup> I take this to be sufficient motivation for looking to see if a better analysis of players and avatars is available. Recalling that our initial puzzle in this section was how, within the fiction of the game, is it the case that events belonging to the game's possibility structure are made actual, and having seen that the avatar falls short as a candidate explanation, we can take the natural next step of trying out various ways of analyzing the player as, in some sense, "within" the narrative of the video game. In so doing, we will arrive at what I take to be the correct analysis of the actualizing agent within video games: namely, the fictional player.

Pretheoretically, if you ask a gamer how the possibilities in video games are made actual, she will probably say something like, "That's obvious: *I* make things happen." An initial way of trying to involve the player as a causal agent within the narrative, then, would be to take the gamer's answer literally: it is true within the fiction, we might say, that the player of the video game makes the avatar execute certain actions. Juul thinks that such interaction between the real world of the player and the fictional world of the video game is one of the medium's defining features: he thinks video games "[mix] fictional levels" by, for example, integrating elements of gameplay mechanics into the content of a video game's

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<sup>66</sup> Theorists who defend IAP may not take it to have the same extension as the conception of 'video games' with which I am working: many theorists here are working with the same broader conception of video games that I discussed with regard to the ludology/narrativity debate in the last chapter. But if the proposal is meant to apply over a strictly broader set of video games than that which I have in mind, then it had better apply to what I am calling 'video games' as well.

fictional world—for instance, a character in a video game might make reference to which buttons on the controller a player can press to enact certain actions through the avatar.<sup>67</sup>

The problem with proposals like Juul’s is that they don’t describe video games as mixing *fictional* levels: rather, as the name of his book, ‘Half-Real’, suggests, they describe video games as mixing the *real* world with a fictional world. And it is easy to see that such a proposal relocates our problem of event actualization, rather than solving it: for it isn’t at all clear how a real, flesh-and-blood consumer of narrative could causally interact with the fictional constituents of a narrative. It is standard to assume that something cannot act as a cause of something belonging to a metaphysically different world. This is the problem that plagues dualists like Descartes (“What is mind-body interaction?”), and it is easy to apply the same problem to a real entity causally influencing a fictional entity. To give up on this assumption about causation would require implausibly collapsing or drastically revising the distinction between real and fictional entities, and I take this to be sufficient reason to look elsewhere for our account of fictional event-actualization in video games.

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<sup>67</sup> Juul (2005a), p. 183. I will not revisit the exact case that Juul invokes here, but the ontology I ultimately defend can accommodate such cases: the correct interpretation of such “in-fiction” references to game mechanics made by a character are, on my view, presentations of aspects of the possibility structure to the fictional player by the narrator. So it’s not right to say that a character in the video game actually references the video game’s controls: the correct analysis is instead that the character’s statements are presented *in a certain guise* to the fictional player by the narrator. For example: if an instructor tells the avatar “Press A to swing your sword,” they are telling or teaching the avatar something about how to swing their sword, but are not themselves invoking anything like game controls; the presentation of this information in terms of game controls is due to the narrator’s presentation of the character’s speech. This departs minimally from our intuitive notion that narrators, in presenting fictional events, thereby interpret events in some way.

Is the question of how characters can reference video game controls a Waltonian “Silly Question”: a question like why Othello speaks in iambic pentameter, which is “pointless, inappropriate, out of order...distracting and destructive”? (Walton (1990), pp. 175-176.) If it is, so much the better for me: Juul can’t use the case in his favor, and I don’t have to bother with an explanation. But I don’t think this is a Silly Question case: a key feature of Walton’s Silly Questions is that they concern how content within a fiction (e.g., Othello’s speech) is represented to someone outside the fiction (e.g., the theatregoer): Walton says that when such questions are asked, “[tensions] emerge from differences between fictional worlds and the real one” (Walton (1990), p. 179). At this point in the dialectic, however, we’ve already conceded that we need to bring the player *into* the fiction of the video game in one way or another, and so the question at issue seems to be how a character can talk about video game controls *within the fiction itself*, rather than an issue of how a character is represented to the world outside the fiction. So the question principally concerns how characters can communicate to players within the context of the fiction, which strikes me as an appropriate target for explanation.

If the player can't literally be a constituent of a video game's narrative, and we have seen the motivation for analyzing them as directly involved in the video game's fiction in some way, then we need to look for other roles that the player could plausibly assume within the fiction. Given that there is precedent in other narrative media for consumers being given the roles of *characters* in the narrative (e.g., second-person novels, experimental theater), a natural proposal at this point is that *the player plays the role of a character within a video game's narrative, where that character actualizes events by controlling an avatar*. Such a proposal avoids the problem of real-fictional causality, and it establishes the sort of distance between the fictional role of the player and the avatar in order to account for (at least) the explanatory, exploratory, and epistemic data.

However, this new proposal has a flaw that I take to be just as damning as the real-fictional interaction is for the real-player-as-fictional-causal-agent account. If we analyze the player as playing the role of a character within the fiction of the video game, then this role that the player plays exists in the same fictional world as the video game's other characters (i.e. avatars and NPCs). As entities that all exist in a single (fictional) world, characters should be able to interact with one another; yet despite the character-role of the player being able (putatively) to control the avatar, avatars and NPCs can only interact with each other—they cannot interact with this supposed player-as-character. To accept this analysis, we would put ourselves in the paradoxical position of saying that the player plays a role that at once allows her to causally interact with one particular character (the avatar) and does not allow any of the other characters to interact with her. This contradicts that logic of what it means for entities to coexist in a world; thus, similarly to our player-as-causal-agent proposal, we would pay a hefty and quite general theoretical price for endorsing this proposal.

We need to look elsewhere, and we now have the resources to do so in a reasoned way. We have on the table an ontologically homogeneous object—the video game, in my technical sense—and a puzzle as to how, within the fiction that this object represents, events are actualized. Thus far in exploring this puzzle, we have been progressively proposing views primarily on the basis of their intuitive plausibility: the avatar-as-causal-agent seemed like a natural first candidate, and we reasoned onward from there. Having seen at this point that there are strong reasons against the three most intuitive solutions to our puzzle, it is time to return to our ontology and propose a new sort of solution that, despite being significantly less intuitive than its predecessors, squares in a principled way with the other components of video games’ ontology, thereby rendering a reasoned, comprehensive picture of what video games are and how they tell stories. In so doing, we will find a new kind of fictional entity that gives us that explanations of the data in video game storytelling that have eluded us thus far.

### **§3.4 Realizing Narratives: The Possibility Structure and the Fictional Player**

In the last chapter, we saw that we need to posit a new ontological entity in order to capture the fictions of video games: the possibility structure, which contains all possible events that can be actualized to form narratives within that game, together with relations that structure and govern the orders in which these events can be actualized. My proposal here is that we take this possibility structure seriously as a new part of fiction, in the following sense: the possibility structure constitutes part of the fiction that is not identical with any fictional world represented by a narrative of the video game, but that instead functions as an abstract, metaphysically foundational space in the fiction, from which narratives and the fictional worlds that they represent are derived. From this it follows that the possible events in video games are really part of the video game’s fiction even when they are *not* actualized: although

such events are not part of the fictional world that the video game's narrative represents, they are part of the broader fictional metaphysical base that generates these worlds.<sup>68</sup>

I noted when I first introduced the possibility structure that we needed a concomitant analysis of the player's role in a video game's fiction in order to make the possibility structure conceptually precise. Now we are in a position to clarify the exact meaning of "possible events," "derivation" of narratives from the possibility structure, and "generation" of fictional worlds from the possibility structure. In what follows, I first present my full analysis of the possibility structure and the player's role therein. Then, I offer two analogies—one from Leibniz and one from Bohmian mechanics—to render this analysis more plausible. Finally, I show how this new analysis accommodates and explains the explanatory, variability, exploratory, and epistemic data.

The overarching structure of my view is that the fictional worlds of video game narratives are grounded in the operations of an abstract fictional entity—the *fictional player*—on the constituent possible events of an abstract fictional space—the *possibility structure*. The possibility structure is *not* itself a fictional *world*: that is to say, it is not a series of events representing characters acting within a fictional environment; rather, it is *the metaphysical foundation* that determines what fictional worlds can be realized. The 'possible events' that this possibility structure contains are potentially actual events with *conditional probabilities* of being actualized. The *fictional player* acquires information about the organization of the

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<sup>68</sup> On the face of it, it may seem as if Newman (2002) has something like this view in mind when he suggests that "[even] the notion of [an avatar] as an identifiable and singular entity embodied by the player may be an oversimplification indicative of an implicit reliance on existent models of audience [...] [My research suggests that this] linkage is best considered as an experiential whole that synthesises, action, location, scenario, and not merely as a bond between subject and object within a world." But notice that even this broader view of the player's relationship to a video game still grounds that relationship in features of the video game's *fictional world*—i.e. the "experiential whole" that is realized in a playthrough. This is distinct from my claim that the player acts in the role of a fictional player that constitutes part of the *metaphysical grounds* of a video game's fictional world: those grounds are not themselves a fictional world. Given this distinction, even if Newman's analysis ultimately moves beyond IAP, it still locates the player's connection to video game fictions within a fictional world, meaning that it falls victim to the objection that player-as-character views face, discussed above.

possibility structure from the *narrator*, the entity that bridges the video game's narrative and grounding metaphysics by expressing information about the possibility structure to the fictional player from *within* the narrative that the fictional player actualizes.<sup>69</sup> The fictional player then operates on possible events of the possibility structure in such a way as to, in accordance with the events' conditional probabilities, make certain events obtain, thereby realizing a particular fictional world. So, for example, the possibility structure of *Dishonored* contains the possible event <Corvo killed Daud> with probability = 1 conditioned on the interaction of the fictional player with the event, and probability = 0 otherwise. Other possible events may have probabilities that prevent the fictional player from acting as an absolute determinant of that event: for example, *Skyrim*'s possibility might contain the events <The Dragonborn [i.e. the avatar] dealt  $x$  damage to the dragon Alduin>, <The Dragonborn [i.e. the avatar] dealt  $y$  damage to the dragon Alduin>, and <The Dragonborn [i.e. the avatar] dealt  $z$  damage to the dragon Alduin>, each with probability 0.33 conditioned on the fictional player realizing the immediately preceding event <The Dragonborn attacked the dragon Alduin>. Thus the possibility structure, as a fictional metaphysical foundation, establishes a well-defined set of possible fictional worlds, all with well-defined probabilities of actually occurring; the fictional player is the entity that operates on the constituent possible events of the possibility structure, thereby updating the probabilities of these possible events in such a way as to establish *the* actual fictional world of the video game, as identified with the player's playthrough. Taken together, it follows that the possibility

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<sup>69</sup> This is a precisification of the narrating entity that I motivated at the end of the last chapter. Obviously it bears an imperfect analogy to the narrators of (for example) novels, and the use of the term 'narrator' is only intended to invoke that loose analogy whereby both entities express the content of a fictional world to the audience of the narrative in *some* guise, be that the guise of flesh-and-blood person or the guise of fictional player.

structure and operations of the fictional player are *the full, fictional ground for the fictional world of the playthrough*.

The notion of an underlying fictional metaphysical structure grounding fictional worlds is substantially less intuitive than IAP, and so far as I can see it has no analogue in other narrative media: it uniquely emerges in video games as the best explanation of how players and author-dictated possible events interact to create narratives in a video game. Despite this uniqueness, two analogies will serve to make the general notion of such a metaphysical, non-world foundation for reality more intuitively plausible.

The first analogy is to Leibniz's concept of god. On Leibniz's view, God initially set out all the possibilities of the universe, and thereafter acts so as to actualize certain of those possibilities. He sets out this idea in §14 of his *Discourse on Metaphysics*.

Now, first of all, it is very evident that created substances depend upon God, who preserves them and who even produces them continually by a kind of emanation, just as we produce our thoughts. For God, so to speak, turns on all sides and in all ways the general system of phenomena which he finds it good to produce in order to manifest his glory, and *he views all the faces of the world in all ways possible*, since there is no relation that escapes his omniscience. The result of each view of the universe, as seen from a certain position, is a substance which expresses the universe in conformity with this view, *should God see fit to render his thought actual* and to produce this substance.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Leibniz (1989), pp. 46-47. Emphases mine.

God's "[rendering] his thought actual" gives rise to the reality of the world, and thereby serves as the world's metaphysical grounds. The operations of the fictional player on possible events in the possibility structure similarly grounds the fictional worlds realized in playthroughs of video games, with one obvious difference: whereas Leibniz's God also establishes the world's possibilities in the first place, the fictional player does not establish the possibility structure—that is the domain of the video game's author.

The second analogy is to Bohmian mechanics, which claims that the positions of particles in the world evolve in accordance with a *guiding equation* that expresses the velocity of particles in terms of their corresponding wave functions. In this way, the seemingly non-deterministic behavior of quantum particles is rendered deterministic: the guiding equation governs, deterministically, the motion of particles, taking as inputs their initial positions and wave functions.<sup>71</sup>

The possibility structure and fictional player are like the abstract guiding equation that (according to Bohmian mechanics) deterministically guides particles through quantum configuration space. From the perspective of "inside" our world, quantum mechanical behavior seems irreducibly stochastic; yet Bohmian mechanics says that this behavior is fully specified and determined by an equation that governs the evolution of our world (in terms of positions of particles). Just so, while events might seem probabilistic within a playthrough, our theory tells us that they evolve deterministically in accordance with the metaphysically grounding function of fictional player operating on the possibility structure. And, like the guidance equation, the fictional player and possibility structure do not constitute a *world*: they instead function as metaphysical determinants of how a world (i.e. the playthrough) evolves.

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<sup>71</sup> See Ney (2013), pp. 28-32.

It is crucial to recognize how radical a departure this proposal is from ordinary talk about video games. I am not only claiming that the player does not fictionally assume the role of the avatar: I am also claiming that, ontologically, *there is no sense in which the player directly controls the avatar*. Rather, the fictional player, recognizing possible events within the video game's possibility structure, actualizes those possibilities, thereby generating a fictional world that the possibility structure and fictional player ground. The fictional player's causal agency consists in *the bringing about of a fictional world*, not in the controlling of an avatar.

No doubt this account of player interaction with video games has drawbacks. Most immediately, we are forced to accept that most of common language about video games is metaphorical: we do not play as avatars, and we do not even control avatars. Yet at the cost of giving up the authority of common language, we get a complete ontology of video games, subsuming both stochastic and non-stochastic events under a single, powerful analysis. Moreover, we now have the resources to offer robust and illuminating explanations of the explanatory, variability, exploratory, and epistemic data that are central to how video games function as a narrative medium.

### **§3.4.1 The Explanatory Datum**

Recall that IAP was unable to account for the datum that, in any given video-game narrative, many of the avatar's actions are inexplicable if we appeal only to the avatar's epistemic set. I defended this critique using the example of asking why, after much failing-and-repeating, the player's *Skyrim* avatar, Icarus, avoided a corner that had a monster hiding behind it. With the fictional player, we can offer a perfectly natural explanation in answer to the question of why Icarus avoided the corner: "The fictional player knew that there is a powerful monster behind that corner, and so she made it the case that Icarus avoided that corner."

More generally, the fictional-player account claims that there are two levels of explanation within the fiction of a video game: a *world-internal* level of explanation, and a *grounding* level of explanation. World-internal explanations are those that just reference facts about the constituents of a video game’s fictional world—i.e. constituents of the video game’s playthrough—in the explanans. Grounding explanations, on the other hand, cite facts about the possibility structure and the fictional player in the explanans. For any given explanandum event in the fictional world of a video game, it will always be the case that both a world-internal explanation and a grounding explanation exist. What the monster-around-the-corner example shows is that the content of a video game’s fictional world will sometimes *underdetermine* the world-internal explanation of an event: while the explanation presumably still exists, we don’t have the resources from the video game’s representational content to access the explanation. In such cases, therefore, we instead revert to the grounding explanation: the basis on which the fictional player realizes events through the possibility structure is always available to us, and has particular explanatory value in cases like the monster around the corner because in such cases it is the only explanation accessible to us.

The fictional-player analysis is also explanatorily powerful here because it allows us to provide grounding explanations for a diversity of other fictional events that lack readily accessible world-internal explanations. Modern players of video games often read *strategy guides* to video games that outline the various areas in a video game’s fiction, what can be found in these areas, and so on. A player of *Skyrim* might have read about the above monster-bearing corner in such a guide and therefore directed Icarus to avoid it; when asked the question of why Icarus avoided the corner, we can offer the same explanans as above: “The fictional player knew that there is a powerful monster behind that corner, and so made

it the case that Icarus avoided it.” *Mutatis mutandis* for the case in which a knowledgeable onlooker warns a novice player about the monster; *mutatis mutandis* for a seasoned player of video games generally, who, on the basis of that general experience, anticipates the monster and therefore directs Icarus to avoid the corner.

Our analysis is also explanatorily powerful because it captures an equally relevant explanatory *difference* between the failing-and-repeating case and the strategy guides case.<sup>72</sup> We can frame the difference in terms of a potential explanatory regress. Suppose that in both cases, after receiving the answer “The fictional player knew that there is a powerful monster behind that corner, and so made it the case that Icarus avoided it,” our questioner persists: “How did the fictional player know about the monster?” In the failing-and-repeating case, we have a ready answer: namely, the process of failing-and-repeating, by which the fictional player learned about the video game’s possibility structure. Because this process is fully fictional—the fictional player explores fictional possibilities, and then fictionally realizes those possibilities—it is a proper and complete grounding explanation. But in the strategy guide case (and *mutatis mutandis* for the onlooker-warning and seasoned-player cases), it seems wrong to point to the strategy guide as part of the grounding explanation because the guide isn’t fictional in any sense. The fictional player didn’t read the guide: the real player did.

I think that it is right and informative, as our model implies, to say that there simply isn’t a further grounding explanation than “the fictional player simply knew.” For there *is* no further explanation for such cases within the fiction: the player stopped playing the role of fictional character in order to look for real-world sources of information about the video game. What’s especially interesting here is that the case illuminates how the possibility structure of video games complicates the matter of players importing their real knowledge

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<sup>72</sup> Thanks to Jonathan Slifkin for pressing me on this issue.

when engaging fiction: because video games' narrators only reveal a portion of video games' possibility structure to players as they engage the narrative, it is possible for the player to gain from external sources information about the possibility structure that they wouldn't know simply by engaging the fiction for the first time on their own. This, I think, is the right account of why certain sources of a fictional player's knowledge—namely, those derived from the player—are inadmissible as fictional explanations of the avatar's actions.

In sum, the fictional-player account doesn't just give us the resources to explain the original monster-around-the-corner case: it also differentiates various types of fictional-event explanations in such a way as to suggest it is *extensionally adequate*: it gives us the resources to give the right explanatory verdicts in a wide array of explanation-apt fictional-event cases. IAP can't offer us anything like this.

### §3.4.2 The Variability Datum

IAP, we saw, is unable to easily account for the diversity of number of avatars within and across games. In contrast, our analysis of the fictional player as realizing fictional events explains what unifies these diverse sorts of avatar relations. Return to the case of the avatar-less *wipEout*, where Robson & Meskin were led to stipulate that the player imagines an avatar despite the lack of any such avatar explicitly represented in the game: we can instead say that, just like in video games with avatars, the fictional player is merely recognizing possible events within the fiction and making them the case.

A further benefit of the fictional-player analysis is that its simple analysis of player-avatar relations illuminates the connection between avatars and the narrative concept of point-of-view. Intuitively, there is clearly some relationship between avatars and the perspective through which a player experiences the fiction of a video game: even in video games where the player sees their avatar from some external perspective, rather than looking

at the world of the video game through the avatar's eyes, the player is in some sense “tethered” to the avatar throughout the progression of the narrative. Indeed, my previous argument for event-relativity seemed to depend on a tight tether of this kind. It might seem promising to ground this relationship by claiming that the player “embodies” the avatar, or “imagines” herself as the avatar throughout the game, but we saw that such accounts ultimately fail. Can the fictional-player account offer a satisfying explanation of why players often seem tethered to avatars, given that there is no deep ontological connection between them?

I contend that my view can answer this challenge in a way that is contiguous with point-of-view in other media. The ways in which a player can actualize possible events within the fiction—i.e. the “rules” governing actualization, mentioned above—tend to link actualizable events together in orders that maintain a coherent narrative focus. This focus may be on a single character (one avatar), a group of potential avatars, or some non-avatar entity (e.g., the racing craft in *wipEout*). The consistent focus affords *narrative coherence*, which also explains why video games can feature sequences that *don't* include the avatar (e.g., a cutscene showing NPCs interacting) without the video game suddenly becoming incoherent or inaccessible: it is better in this regard to conceive the fictional player as actualizing various coherent narratives, rather than directly causing an avatar to do things.

Theorists of narrative and art tend to underscore that it is at least difficult and perhaps impossible to unify all stories and forms of storytelling under a simple set of general principles, appealing though that goal may be.<sup>73</sup> Instead, each story must be sensitive to its own internal aesthetic demands, overall composition, and so on. A natural way to spell out

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<sup>73</sup> Booth and Walton both emphasize this many times over, with Booth (1983) noting that the particular content of stories functions so as to serve the particular aesthetic needs of that story (e.g., p. 254, in his discussion of *Emma*) and Walton (1990) comparing the “unruly” and vague ways in which various works of fiction generate fictional truths to the machinery of metaphor (pp. 185-187).

this sort of sensitivity is with the notion that all of the content in a narrative must “hang together” in such a way as to be comprehensible to the consumer of that narrative. Walton seems to have something like this in mind when he proposes the “supplementation rule” as the principle that governs how people engaging fiction rightly fill in the content of their imaginings about that fiction.

The relevant rule, I suggest, is one to the effect that the body of propositions fictional in [those imaginings] is to be filled out in certain natural or obvious ways, preserving the coherence of the whole.<sup>74</sup>

In one sense, Walton’s proposal is unsatisfying: just what does it take for a way of filling out an analogy to be “natural” or “obvious”? Yet in another sense, we would be wrong to expect more from a view that claims narratives and fictions are too diverse to unify under any simple set of general principles. Walton does appeal to a general notion that gives us an intuitive grasp on how fictions organize themselves: when someone engages a fiction, its content must *cohere*. Different fictions needn’t cohere with one another, but the consumption of any given work of fiction requires abiding by this rule.

While Walton’s supplementation principle is deeply embedded in his overall program of aesthetics, the notion of *narrative coherence* can easily be borrowed for our purposes, without committing us to the rest of Walton’s account. The term as I use it just refers to the quality of a narrative whereby its events are collectively intelligible to the consumer of that narrative. Like my initial characterization of ‘narrative’, narrative coherence so-described is intended to be congenial to a variety of theories of narrative; I take it as given that, whatever theory of narrative we adopt, something like narrative coherence will naturally fall out of it.

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<sup>74</sup> Walton (1990), p. 46.

Narrative coherence allows us to explain why video games often focus on a single character, the avatar. Given that the player is acting in the role of an entity (the fictional player) that actualizes sequences of events involving characters, it is narratively coherent to structure the way in which the fictional player can actualize events around the actions of a particular character. We know from myriad cases of narrative that people *identify* with characters, and that it is often apt to present a narrative through the *perspective* of a certain character, whether that character is merely the protagonist or also the narrator. Thus it makes sense to preserve these elements of storytelling by making the locus of the fictional player's event-actualization be events concerning the actions of a particular character: designing the possibility structure in this way naturally invites a certain perspective through which the player can experience the fiction of the video game, and invites identification with a particular character.<sup>75</sup> The preservation of these narrative factors—identification and perspective—help render the evolution of the video game's narrative coherent.

Note that none of the above *entails* that a video game structures its possibility space around an avatar to achieve narrative coherence. This is the right result: it allows us to account for video games that lack an avatar, as well as for video games that have multiple avatars. As an example from the former class of video game, consider *Fire Emblem*: rather than apparently following around and controlling a single character, the player of *Fire Emblem* (qua fictional player) plays the role of an army tactician: you have a god's-eye view of a battlefield, and direct your troops to take various actions throughout the course of battle.<sup>76</sup> Such a narrative form is clearly coherent, but it does not use an avatar to achieve that

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<sup>75</sup> Let me emphasize that there is nothing incompatible between my ontology of video games and the notion of the player identifying with the avatar of a video game. The key point here is simply that, at ontological bedrock, it can't be the case within the fiction that the avatar is actually acting as the player's proxy, or is being controlled by the player.

<sup>76</sup> Intelligent Systems (2003).

coherence: instead, it makes the fictional player herself the focal character that unifies the narrative. Thus our account gives us the flexibility to explain the multitudinous ways in which video games can achieve narrative coherence.

One consequence of the fictional-player analysis that's worth noting here is that it requires that we slightly revise event-relativity: whereas we ran the argument for event-relativity in Chapter 2 by studying a change in which character was the avatar in a given narrative (*Dishonored* and its DLCs), narrative coherence reveals that the relevant feature of that case was just that *we changed the locus of the fictional player's operations on the possibility space (from one character to another)*, thereby changing the underlying metaphysics of events in the fiction. Thus, while event-relativity is still true, it ends up being a claim about events in video game narratives intrinsically depending on the ways in which the fictional player can realize them. In this way, our account of the fictional player also demystifies the matter of *why* event-relativity holds in video games: fictional events of course depend on their fictional grounds, and so it makes no sense to suppose that we could change the fictional grounds (i.e. modify the possibility structure) and plausibly assume the events related to those grounds would be unaffected.

### §3.4.3 The Exploratory Datum

IAP could not adequately accommodate and explain that a typical part of the act of playing a video game and consuming its narrative is the act of *exploring* the possibility structure of the game: the proposal's only viable option was to leave such exploration outside the fiction of the game. Yet if we instead endorse the fictional-player view, we can naturally analyze the exploratory datum in a way that recognizes its centrality to the storytelling of video games: possibility-exploration is a method by which the fictional player gleans a broader swath of the narrative's possibilities, as presented by the narrator.

The IAP proponent might object here by claiming that exploration is *better* left outside of the video game’s fiction: she might liken it to the act of turning pages in a book, an act which of course has no fictional standing. But this response ignores the fact that, unlike the page-turning case, possibility-exploration is crucial in how the world of a video game ends up being constituted: the final “narrative” (i.e. playthrough) of a video game is the product of the fictional player exploring, weighing, and settling on possible narrative constituents (i.e. events). Thus possibility-exploration is crucial in substantiating the narrative’s world *within the broader context* of the video game’s fiction (i.e. including their fictional grounds), whereas page-turning is crucial only to a reader being able to “access,” in some suitably loose sense, the fixed constituents of the novel’s fictional world.

#### §3.4.4 The Epistemic Datum

The fictional-player proposal is especially well equipped to explain the fact that the avatar’s epistemic set can differ in narratively significant ways from the player’s. Revisiting the narrative of *Spec Ops: The Line*, we now have the theoretical resources to easily and fully capture the core of its narrative import: the fictional player, perfectly sane, comes to recognize that they are actualizing events in which Captain Walker commits terrible atrocities. Walker is insane, driven mad by war, but the fictional player, aware of that insanity, nevertheless chooses to continue to enact events in which that insanity costs lives and insidiously aggravates Walker’s PTSD.<sup>77</sup>

The more we recognize the avatar as a character that is distinct from the fictional player, the better theoretical sense we can make of all sorts of video game stories. *Spec Ops* is not an isolated case: as a sociological fact, many video games capitalize on just this sort of

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<sup>77</sup> Notice that this is a distinct case from merely choosing to read a fictionally immoral novel: in such a novel, the fictionally immoral events are already established, whereas in video games the fictionally immoral events are contingent on the fictional player’s choice to actualize them. Thus the fictional player is culpable in such cases, whereas the person reading a fictionally immoral novel putatively isn’t.

epistemic asymmetry between fictional player and avatar. Theoretically, this result was to be expected: given that the fictional player is making events the case with the focus on a character to whom she has limited access (i.e. the avatar), it is as natural to tell stories that turn on the imperfection of that limited access as it is to tell stories with unreliable narrators, which generates closely analogous sort of epistemic asymmetry between themselves and readers.

### **§3.5 Conclusion**

We began this thesis with the goal of identifying a new mode of storytelling that video games have brought to light. After looking to film to see what “a new mode of storytelling” might look like, we established a coherent ontology of video games as a narrative medium, cutting through the ludic/narrative debate and debates that assume IAP along the way. This ontology reveals a variety of special features about video games: authors do not fix the narrative of a video game; mere events in video game fictions essentially depend on the locus of the player’s agency in the video game; and the player, rather than controlling or acting as the avatar, plays the role of the fictional player, a new kind of fictional entity that fictionally grounds the fictional worlds represented by video game narratives. Though this account is revisionary with respect to both ordinary and theoretical discourse about video games, it provides the best explanations for how video games represent fictions and tell stories. With our new ontology and a new understanding of the player in hand, we can endeavor to capture the full range of ways in which video games innovate as a narrative medium.

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<sup>78</sup> Note that my citation format for video games is ‘Developer Studio (Year of Publication): *Video Game Title*. Publication City: Publisher’.

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