

Partners in Crime

The Relationship Between the Playable Character and the Videogame Player

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A dissertation presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Bachelor
of Arts with Honours in Communication and Cultural Studies.

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University of Queensland

2011

Statement of Sources

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief original, except as acknowledged in the text, and has not been submitted either in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other university.

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Abstract

This thesis creates a space for videogame criticism to account for the playable character's role in the shaping of the player's experience. Just as the player defines certain actions and characteristics of the playable character, so too do the character's actions and characteristics shape the player's experience. The two exist in an intimate coupling where intention and action start with neither actor but in the flow of information and agency between them.

To account for how meaning is produced in videogame play the videogame critic must account not only for the player's agency and actions but also for how the player *is acted upon*. Players interact with videogames textually as fictional worlds embedded with actual imperatives that afford and constraint different styles of play. While most videogame scholars acknowledge the role of the playable character as a vehicle through which the player navigates and configures this world, rarely is its mediating effect on the player fully recognised. In discourses surrounding videogame play it is not unlikely for the terms "player" and "character" to be used interchangeably when discussing the agent that acts within the videogame's fictional world. This uncertainty as to just who is acting highlights a gap in the existing literature on playable characters and their significance towards the production of textual meaning.

Engaging with actor-network theory and cyborg theory to understand videogame play as cybernetic, this thesis demonstrates how the playable character's nonhuman agency—independent of the player's intentions—can be accounted for. It explores how the agencies of both player and playable character intertwine and mediate each other to form a hybrid actor, the player-character, which is the actual actor that navigates both the actual and fictional worlds encompassed in videogame play. Finally, through a textual analysis of *Grand Theft Auto IV*, this thesis demonstrates how the player-character hybrid can be deployed to account for the playable character's role in the production of the videogame text's meaning.

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Acknowledgements

This thesis is indebted to the guidance, insights, enthusiasm, and challenges of my supervisors, Associate Professor Frances Bonner and Associate Professor Jason Jacobs. Thank you for the countless drafts read, emails responded to, and conversations engaged in.

Without the close, attentive editing performed by Helen Berents, Julie Berents, and Rafaela Henry, this thesis would be twice as long and half as coherent. Thank you for taking the time to help me make this thesis the best it can be.

I would also like to thank the entire Communications and Cultural Studies Honours cohort who not only shared this exhilarating year with me but got me through it. I'll always be grateful for your persistent enthusiasm and engagement with my topic.

I also owe my gratitude to the diverse community of videogame critics from around the world I have had the privilege to converse with both online and in person while developing the arguments forwarded in this thesis. Especially (but far from exclusively) I must thank Ben Abraham, Daniel Golding, Fraser Allison, Nick LaLone, Adrian Forest, Christian McCrea, Adam Ruch, Kris Ligman, and Kevin Veale. I would be lost without your insights, criticisms, and reading suggestions.

Finally, for more than her editing prowess, this thesis would not have been completed (nor indeed survived) without Helen Berents's constant bestowing of love, support, and brownies.

Introduction

In the videogame *Spacewar!* (Russell et al 1962), two players control spaceships stuck within the gravitational pull of a star. Each player is able to control their ship's throttle, missiles, and hyperspace drive in an attempt to destroy the other player's ship while avoiding the star's gravity well. In one sense, the playable characters of *Spacewar!* (that is, the spaceships) will do nothing without the players. They will not attempt to fire at the other; they will not resist the gravity of the star; they will not dodge incoming fire. However, regardless of what the player intends to do, their spaceship will be affected by the star's gravity, will be destroyed if hit by a wayward missile, and will run out of fuel if the throttle is used too often. Separate from the player's intentions and inputs (without which the spaceship will not act), the spaceship is a fictional being of the world projected audiovisually by *Spacewar!*, and the player's intentions are mediated by the spaceship's existence within that world. The player understands how the world of *Spacewar!* functions through the different actions afforded and constrained by their spaceship. Through this example from one of the earliest videogames, the significance of the playable character becomes apparent: more than the means by which the player engage with the videogame's space, the playable character is the means through which the player *understands* the videogame's space. As such, how the player relates to the playable character has some say in determining the *manner* of the player's engagement with the videogame. The player's comprehension of the videogame is shaped, in part, by who (or what) the playable character is and what they (or it) can and cannot do.

This thesis outlines a way to consider the playable character not as a simple, passive tool used by the player but as an actor in its own right, one that both shapes and is shaped by the player's actions and intentions in an intimate and intricate network of relationships crossing back and forth between the actual and fictional worlds of videogame play. Neither player nor playable character is the master of the other, and both contribute to the player's engagement with the videogame.

Such an analysis is particularly concerned with the effect of the playable character on the player's perception and interpretation of what can be understood as the videogame

text—namely, what emerges or is constructed in a specific player’s engagement with a specific videogame (Atkins and Kryzwinska 3). Just as texts of other media, such as film or literature, have long been argued to exist in their consumption, a videogame text is not an object isolated from its subjective player but an assemblage formed between player *and* videogame. However, the videogame medium offers its own unique modes of consumption, engagement, and textual construction. The player has an active, literal role in producing the videogame text by navigating the playable character through the videogame’s world. The videogame text, Atkins and Kryzwinska argue, is produced through images, sound and music, mechanics, difficulty, and possible and impossible modes of play all acting in concert with the individual player’s actual engagement with the videogame (5). Thus

concentrating on the relationship between games and players’ use of what is offered to produce text forces the focus on particularities, thereby aiding in the process of avoiding the type of over-generalization that often sidelines subtleties and shades of difference. It is only in the act of playing a game, becoming a subject to those formal regimes that act to interpolate the player and shape the experience that we are able to understand at a deeper level the experience of playing videogames. (Atkins and Kryzwinska 5)

To consider playable characters in a way that contributes to a textual framework of videogame criticism, this thesis assigns careful attention to how the individual videogame is actually played. As such, it is not contributing to a body of literature primarily concerned with what videogames “should” be, such as the body of literature from the ludology/narratology debate that argues between videogames as games and videogames as narratives¹. Nor does it contribute to a body of literature that examines player-player relationships in massively multiplayer games such as *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard 2004) or *Second Life* (Linden 2003) as done by digital ethnographic studies². Nor does it claim videogames are capable of communicating meanings that other media, such as film and literature, are not. Rather, this thesis contributes to a growing body of critical literature that

¹ See Aarseth, Eskelinen, Juul, Frasca, Jenkins, and Klevjer as some of the central theorists of this debate. For a thorough summary of the debate see Wilson’s “Gameplay and the Aesthetics of Intimacy,” in particular “Chapter Three: Narrative, Fictional Worlds, and Visualised Imperatives” (185-295).

² See T L Taylor.

takes as its concern the unique *ways* in which meaning is produced between videogame and player in individual single-player and multiplayer videogame texts as actually played.

Such a body of literature avoids utopic understandings of videogames as objects over which the player "should" have the "freedom" or "agency" to do as they wish and instead pragmatically understands videogames as both affording and restricting modes of play. "The key performative elements demanded of the player by a videogame are always located within a set of contexts that give player-performance its edge, meaning and motivation, and therefore potentially greater definition and substance" (Atkins and Kryzwinska 6). An analysis of the meaning produced by a videogame text, then, must account not just for how the player configures the videogame, but how the videogame configures the player. In this light, this thesis demonstrates how an analysis of a videogame text can account for the effects and mediation of the playable character on the player. It will not prescribe specific, top-down attributes to all playable characters. Rather, it will outline a framework that can account for individual playable characters, their contributions to the videogame text, and their mediation of the player. Such a framework starts with the relationships that connect player and playable character together.

Chapter One will demonstrate how the virtual space of a videogame is not experienced by the player as a split beast with a mechanical core and an interchangeable surface of audiovisual representation, but as a singular, hybridised, *fictional* world projected audiovisually and embedded with affordances and constraints that are often understood as the videogame's "rules". Within these fictional worlds, various theorists understand the player's engagement with the videogame as that of enacting the role of the playable character. Chapter One will explore and problematise these concepts, ultimately showing that they uncritically simplify the complex interrelationship between player, playable character, and world.

To render this interrelationship traceable, Chapter Two explores a more nuanced understanding of videogame play through a framework of cybernetics that privileges neither the player nor the videogame as the primary agent but focuses on the relationship between the two where each contributes to the ongoing configuration of the other. Within this understanding of videogame play as cybernetic, the player's complex interrelation with the playable character is seen not to be merely one of enacting but of both acting and being

acted upon. The player and playable character form an intimate and cyborgian coupling that this chapter will understand as the player-character hybrid—consisting of both player and playable character but reducible to neither.

Chapter Three then demonstrates how this player-character hybrid can be deployed through an analysis of the videogame *Grand Theft Auto IV* (Rockstar North 2008). Close attention is paid to how the unique identity and abilities of the playable character mediate and shape (and are mediated and shaped by) the player's perception of the games' consistent fictional world. Such an analysis will demonstrate that critically understanding a videogame text and its production of meaning must consider both the player's configuration of the videogame and the videogame's configuration of the player through the mediating, reflexive, and active playable character.

Chapter One: Intimate Worlds

“[V]ideogames are an inescapably hybrid medium from the beginning” (Wilson, “Gameplay” 76).

Just as a seaman requires a vessel to traverse an ocean, the videogame player requires a playable character to traverse the virtual space of a videogame. However, just as the type of vessel the seaman finds himself upon will, in part, shape his voyage, the playable character in the player’s control will mediate and shape the player’s experience of the videogame. This chapter examines the problems in considering the playable character as a mere surrogate or avatar that unquestioningly transfers the player’s intentions into the videogame’s virtual space. It exposes the active and reflexive relationships between the player and the playable character that videogame discourses often disavow and instead shows that there is always a necessary distinction and difference between the player and the playable character.

Initially, this chapter explores how players engage with videogames’ virtual spaces as fictional worlds. This foundation contextualises the significance of the playable character within the act of videogame play as it is through the playable character that the player is able to navigate and configure these worlds. Secondly, then, the playable character’s role within the fictional world as currently understood by videogame scholars is examined and critiqued. This will highlight both the centrality of the playable character to the player’s engagement with the fictional world and, conversely, how the playable character is currently understood uncritically as the player “in” the game. Finally, this chapter problematises these understandings of a passive playable character by demonstrating how they have led to a conflation in videogame discourses of “player” and “character” as interchangeable titles for the same actor rather than accounting for the unique contributions of both player and playable character.

Occupying the Fictional World

To understand a player's engagement with a videogame as an engagement with a fictional world is to consider the player's comprehension of the videogame's audiovisual representation and mechanical systems as a singular experience. In *Half-Real* (2005), Jesper Juul makes some of the earliest steps in this direction when he attempts to account for videogames' storytelling potential within a preexisting framework of fundamental "gameness" by understanding videogames as constructions of rules and fiction. While story, for Juul, implies "a fixed sequence of events that is *presented* (enacted or narrated) to a user", fiction stands for "any kind of imagined world" (122, original emphasis). "To play a video game is [...] to interact with real rules while imagining a fictional world, and a video game is a set of rules as well as a fictional world" (Juul 1). By shifting the focus away from "coherent worlds and well formed storytelling" (Juul 190) towards a much broader category of "fiction", Juul constructively bypasses the ludology/narratology debate that had previously stalled videogame studies to analyse how all videogames are experienced by players as some combination of both rule-based systems and fictional content rather than being *either* a game *or* a story. Narrative may not always adequately account for the player's experience as it may either be too restrictive on the player's range of abilities within the videogame or be rendered incoherent by the player's unrestricted actions. Fiction does not rule out the possibility of coherent narratives but by making no claim to coherency or consistency is more durable than narrative against the player's figurative powers within the videogame.

For Juul, a videogame's fiction can be incomplete and incoherent without disrupting the player's experience thanks to its relationship with the videogame's rules. "[T]he rules of the game can provide a sense of direction even when the fictional world has little credibility" (Juul 6). *Donkey Kong* (Nintendo 1981), for instance, does not explain why Mario, the playable character, has three lives, but the player can make sense of this incoherency through the game's rules: Mario has three lives because the game's rules state that the player will get three attempts (Juul 130). Conversely, a videogame's fiction may help the player understand the videogame's rules. In *Donkey Kong*, those objects that are visually represented as ladders suggest they should be climbed; those represented as barrels and fireballs should clearly be avoided; and those represented as princesses should be rescued

from those represented as giant apes. *Donkey Kong's* player understands what is expected of them and how to engage with the videogame's rules through interpreting the fictional elements on the screen, and the fictional elements are rendered coherent through an understanding of the game's rules. By shifting considerations of narrative to considerations of fiction, Juul brings videogame studies closer to an understanding of videogames as a singular, hybridised medium in their own right.

However, while Juul stresses that the player's experience of the videogame is shaped by both rules and fiction (177), he haphazardly and contrarily claims that "[t]hough rules can function independent of fiction, fiction depends on rules" (121).³ Where Juul progresses beyond the game/narrative binary, he risks imposing a rules/fiction binary. Players do not experience a videogame's rules separate from the videogame's fiction, nor the fiction separate from the rules. Videogame play is not experienced on multiple levels of surface representation and core mechanics. Instead, if we are to understand the player's textual engagement with a videogame we must flatten Juul's separate ontologies of rules and fiction to come to a singular ontology of videogames as they are actually played: singular fictional worlds constructed from both rules *and* fiction where the two are intimate and *inseparable*.

Jason Wilson does just this as part of a broader analysis that calls for the audiovisual content of videogames to be analysed with the same scrutiny as their mechanics. Wilson understands videogames as emerging not exclusively from a millennia-old tradition of non-digital games, but also through the traditions of moving image culture, influenced as much by film, television, and perspective portraits as by sports, chess, and war. Wilson examines the fallacies of Juul's distinction between rules and fiction directly, saying:

³ Juul's (somewhat anecdotal) example of a videogame's fiction being optional is the multiplayer first-person shooter *Quake III Arena* (Id 1999). Juul argues that many seasoned players turn down the graphical settings to obtain a faster frame rate and that this demonstrates that "the player becomes less interested in the representational/fictional level of the game and more focused on the rules of the game" (Juul 139). Without even considering the facts that Juul is speaking only of a subset of "hardcore" competitive players and that these players would almost certainly prefer to play with perfect frame rate *and* graphics if their machines were powerful enough, this argument is tenuous at best since elsewhere Juul claims that "game fictions and rules are not perfect and complete simulations of the real world" (17). If a wall, lava pit, or weapon in *Quake III Arena* are not perfect simulations, then making them any "less perfect" through a lowered resolution can hardly be seen as making them any less real—all still exist within the game as fictional, representative objects that play a crucial role in the player's comprehension of the game's rules.

In relation to Juul's claim that rules can operate independently of the fictional projection of videogames' fictional worlds, we can legitimately wonder what such an experience would be like. Could the rules of, say, *PAC-MAN* be said to apply to anything, or be meaningful, in the absence of its graphics and sounds? ("Gameplay" 211)

While acknowledging the significance of Juul's work in creating a space where videogames can be understood in terms of their rules and fictional worlds, Wilson argues that "Juul's lingering ludologist impulse to assert basic continuities between predigital games and videogames" leads Juul to "[underestimate] the importance of fictional world-building in videogame design and is unable to capture the variety of videogame experiences" (Wilson, "Gameplay" 217-18). While nondigital games construct their boundaries through demarcations of space in the actual world, "videogames rely extensively on audiovisual design in their construction of space" (Wilson, "Gameplay" 113). Videogames construct fictional worlds of which both rules and fiction are integral parts. Just as Juul shows how a videogame's fiction cannot exist separate from its rules, Wilson shows that its rules cannot exist separate from its fiction.

Chris DeLeon argues that videogames do not consist of rules all but, rather, shape players' actions through possibilities and constraints:

A videogame is not a definition of rules, which are then enforced by the software-as-referee. A videogame is a definition of a simplified alternative reality, where what often get mislabeled as 'rules' are not rules at all, but rather ways of referring to the constraints and possibilities of that artificial universe. The word 'rule' in such usage is being used as a metaphor, and although it's common to use the word in connection to videogames, I believe it's a source of needless confusion to do so. (DeLeon)

For DeLeon, rules are imagined by a game's player and referee, adhered to by choice but physically able to be broken. Conversely, the possibilities and constraints of a videogame's fictional world are actual. "If something which we're tempted to call a rule does not need to be communicated, understood, paid attention to, or enforced to have full effect, it is not a rule. It is actual" (DeLeon). For instance, gravity need not be considered a rule of soccer as it is not an artificial rule imagined and voluntarily adhered to by the player, but an *actual thing of the world* that affords and constraints different actions within the world of the game.

Thus, we can see that Juul conflates the imagined rules of nondigital games with the actual imperatives embedded within—and as part of—the fictional worlds of videogames.

Wilson similarly notes that the player does not engage with the videogame's rules directly, but experiences them as a set of *imperatives*—affordances and constraints on the player's actions—that only have meaning within the context of the fictional world. “It is within the fictional world created by game designers [...] that the player's rule-based actions have meaning” (Wilson, “Gameplay” 221). This does not imply that the videogame designer determines what the player will do but, rather, that they author the parameters within which the player may act. Yet, within this range the player may discover methods of playing that the designer never intended. Juul highlights the example of *Deus Ex* (Ion Storm 2000) where players discovered a bug that allowed them to stand atop wall-mounted proximity mines to climb walls into areas they were not meant to be able to reach (Juul 75-78). Juul labels such phenomena as “emergent play” and uses the example to highlight “the open landscape of possibilities” in the “primordial game structure” as opposed to the “straight line” of progression-based videogames (73-75).

However, Wilson shows that such emergent play highlights that considerations of rules “cannot account for all the ways in which a game is played” (“Gameplay” 219). When considering how the videogame player engages with and ultimately *plays* a videogame, the range of possibilities implied by imperatives encompasses far more than those allowed by rules. Imperatives account for not just what the player should do or is expected to do, but what they *can* and *are likely to* do. Just as the listener of a song engages not with the instruments but the sounds they produce, just as the viewer of a film engages not with the set and the props but with the scene they evoke, the player of a videogame engages not with an underlying set of rules but with the actual imperatives of the fictional world. These worlds allow and constrain different behaviours and actions. A videogame's fictional world is constructed through audiovisual representation and embedded imperatives that afford and constrain the player's engagement.

The player engages with this fictional world by navigating the world and configuring its elements. Such engagement requires an intimate occupation of the player with the fictional world, which “temporarily [subsumes] the difference between players, fictional worlds, rules, and mediating technologies” (Wilson, “Gameplay” 221). This is reflected in the

discourse surrounding videogames, specifically reviews written by the enthusiast press that often compress player and playable character in their address to a single actor: “you”. For instance, observe these two videogame reviews for *Ms Splosion Man* (Twisted Pixel 2011) and *Red Faction: Armageddon* (Volition 2011):

As in *Splosion Man*, players must make judicious use of a single ability, exploding, in order to navigate the game’s increasingly fiendish levels. You can explode up to three times in the air before needing to recharge, you can explode off walls to reach higher platforms, and you can be propelled in a variety of ways by detonating next to coloured barrels. (*Edge*, “*Ms Splosion Man* Review”)

Red Faction: Armageddon’s world, while unstable—collapsing at the mere suggestion of interaction—feels pleasingly weighty, and the slabs of concrete and metal that fall about your head show off what is one of gaming’s greatest technological playgrounds for demolition. This flattening of the world’s assets is positively encouraged: salvage pickups are the currency used to upgrade Mason’s [the playable character] abilities in a cycle of ever-increasing violence. (*Edge*, “*Red Faction: Armageddon* Review”)

The way this second-person address conflates the roles of player and playable character will be examined below. For now, it is worth noting how both reviews mix objectives, fiction, abilities, and world. Such discourse “reflects videogames’ primary positioning of players as actors in a fictional world and their blurring of boundaries between players, their surrogates, imperatives and affordances of play and the properties of the fictional world” (Wilson, “Gameplay” 220) as well as the difficulty (if not impossibility) of separating a discussion of a videogame’s rules from its fictional world (Wilson, “Gameplay” 221). Wilson describes this intimate relationship that the player shares with the videogame’s fictional world as one that allows the player to be “lost” within the videogame text bodily, cognitively, and affectively: “[t]here is no competition between fictional world and rules for the player’s attention, and they are subsumed *in the same experience of extended intimacy with the game’s world*” (“Gameplay” 225, original emphasis). To play a videogame is to exist intimately with a fictional world that is constructed audiovisually and which affords and constrains the player’s actions and intentions.

Janet Murray similarly understands videogame play as an intimate affair with a fictional world. Murray calls this intimacy “immersion” and while the term has been misappropriated as a marketing buzzword in the years since Murray’s treatise, her initial definition of the term is useful here:

Immersion is a metaphorical term derived from the physical experience of being submerged in water. We seek the same feeling from a psychological immersive experience that we do from a plunge in the ocean or swimming pool: the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality, as different as water is from air, that takes over all our attention, our whole perceptual apparatus. (Murray 98, original emphasis)

While Murray acknowledges that such immersion could entail a mere “flooding the mind with sensation”, in a participatory medium such as videogames, “immersion implies learning to swim, *to do the things that the new environment makes possible* (99, emphasis added). To be immersed in a videogame—to exist intimately with its fictional world—is to experiment and engage with that world’s embedded imperatives. Thus, players engage intimately with a videogame’s fictional world not by suspending disbelief but by actively creating belief (Murray 110). “Because of our desire to experience immersion, we focus our attention on the enveloping world and we use our intelligence to reinforce rather than to question the reality of our experience” (Murray 110). Significantly, we do not enter the fictional world as ourselves, but play the role the fictional world prepares for us while consciously and knowingly remaining outside of it. To play a videogame, then, is to enact a role in a fiction world other than ourselves. The intimate occupation that the videogame requires of the player is an intimate relationship with the playable character through which the fictional world is navigated, experienced, and understood.

The World is a Stage

Much as Wilson (through Juul) and Murray understand videogames as fictional worlds, Henry Jenkins sees videogames as “spatial stories” and understands videogame designers not as storytellers but “narrative architects” (Jenkins 121):

Spatial stories [...privilege] spatial exploration over plot development. Spatial stories are held together by broadly defined goals and conflicts and pushed forward by the *character's* movement across the map. (124, emphasis added)

Jenkins highlights four key attributes through which players experience spatial stories: evocative spaces, embedded narratives, emergent narratives, and enacted stories (124-25). While Jenkins examines these four attributes of spatial stories in isolation with their own case studies, most if not all videogames contain all of them in differing proportions. The single-player campaign⁴ of Infinity Ward's *Modern Warfare 2* (2009), for instance, is a story-driven first-person shooter where navigable spaces are highly linear and the story predetermined. Events are scripted to happen once the player passes a certain position in the world, and will typically happen the same way every time. Predominately, using Jenkins's four attributes, such a text is an enacted narrative, where "the organization of the plot becomes a matter of designing the geography of imaginary worlds, so that obstacles thwart and affordances facilitate the protagonist's forward movement towards resolution" (125). Yet, emergent narratives also exist in the moment-to-moment playing of the game as individual actions may change the way individual skirmishes unfold. Evocative spaces also exist within the fictional world of the game with intentional nods to Middle Eastern battlefields as seen nightly on the news for the past decade and in a generation of contemporary war films. Embedded narratives are present, too, in the embedding of narrative information within the space of each stage.⁵ If all videogames have fictional worlds (as has already been argued above) then all these fictional worlds consist of evocative spaces, emergent narratives, embedded narratives, and—crucially for this thesis—a role that the player must enact.

Jenkins's analysis, especially in relation to spatial stories as enacted narratives, "suggest[s] that players have an ongoing, active engagement with a world with affordances and constraints, rather than engaging with a rule-set whose fictional aspects are incidental"

⁴ It is important to differentiate here between the single-player campaign (which is largely story-driven and progressive) and the competitive, arena-based multiplayer which, while based in the same fictional world, is a largely emergent and competitive play experience.

⁵ On the mission "On Their Own Accord", for instance, the player begins in an underground bunker, surrounded by wounded US soldiers. As the player slowly heads to the surface, various landmarks come into view against a smoke-blackened sky: the Washington Monument with chunks blown out and twisted steel skeleton exposed; the White House on fire, nestled in sandbags and crowned with anti-airfire. Objects embedded in the fictional world present the story to the player: the United States of America is being invaded.

(Wilson, "Gameplay" 228). This "active engagement" is played out specifically by the playable character's movement across and existence within the fictional world (Jenkins 124). Jenkins compares the player's control of the playable character with the theatrical tradition of *commedia dell'arte* where actors do not have scripts but wear masks that define the set of actions possible for their enacted character (Jenkins 125). The analogy highlights the playable character's role as an instiller of a set of affordances and constraints within which the player may act. "No author prescribes what the [*commedia dell'arte*] actors do once they get on the stage, but the shape of the story emerges from this basic vocabulary of possible actions and from the broad parameters set by this theatrical tradition" (Jenkins 125). Similarly, the player understands their role within the videogame through what the playable character is able to do within the imperatives of the fictional world.

Murray, too, evokes an analogy of engagement with videogame texts as a form of enactive mask-wearing. For Murray, the videogame player puts on a mask by acting through the playable character, and this mask helps determine between what is within the fictional world of the videogame (namely, the playable character) and what is outside it (namely, the player). "[A mask] creates the boundary of the immersive reality and signals we are role-playing rather than acting as ourselves [...] It gives us our entry into the artificial world and also keeps some part of ourselves outside of it" (Murray 113). The playable character is where the player is able to cross the border that separates the actual and fictional worlds. Paradoxically, to play a videogame is not to be "in" the fictional world as ourselves at all, but to explicitly play the role of someone else while our "actual" self remains external to the fictional world. However, this paradox is precisely what the player-as-actor analogy tends to blur. It is difficult to consider an actor as enacting a role when they themselves are not on the stage, and it is difficult to imagine a player enacting a role within a videogame's fictional world if the player themselves is not present within that world. While the player's relationship with the playable character is an intimate one, it is still a relationship and not an assimilation; *both the player and the playable character exist in some manner distinct from the other*. However, the relationship is so close that assimilation is precisely what it is often mistaken as. The playable character, when acknowledged at all, is typically understood simply as the virtual extension of the player—as nothing but a mask that the player slips on.

Scott Juster notes that directly transposing the role of theatrical actors onto players and the role of theatrical directors onto game designers “oversimplifies the distinction between the media and the distinct role a player assumes within a game” (“Self-Directed Play”). Rather, the player takes on, in part, both roles:

Just as directors and actors combine their talents to create scenes, the melding of player intention and player execution yield in-game events. The two sides are not always in agreement: no matter how much I visualize the perfect route in *Mirror’s Edge* [DICE 2009] as a player/director, my abilities as a player/actor yield unexpected results. Sometimes this means falling off a roof (thereby ruining the scene) and sometimes this means accomplishing my goal by straying from the original plan (improvisation). (Juster, “Self-Directed Play”)

What Juster’s analysis shows that Murray’s and Jenkins’s mask analogies miss is that often the player will have control of elements that are distinct from the actions of the playable character but still encompassed by the act of videogame play. In third-person videogames,⁶ for instance, the player is often able to move the camera around and choose different angles. In practically all videogames, the player is able to navigate menus that, generally, are invisible to the playable character.⁷ In many arcade games, the player is able to enter their name into high-score charts unreachable by the playable character. Meanwhile, the playable character, too, will often know things that the player has no access to or cause actions to unfold differently than the player intends (as noted by Juster as “unexpected results”). In the above example of *Modern Warfare 2*, on leaving the bunker, the player is shocked to find themselves in Washington D.C, but the playable character, it can be assumed, knows full well where he is. In many other games, the character acts independently of the player in cinematic cut-scenes, or perhaps says things during play that the player has no control over. The talkative playable character Nathan Drake from the adventure game *Uncharted: Drake’s Fortune* (Naughty Dog 2007) often engages in conversation with either his allies or himself while the player navigates him around the world. Often, playable character may withhold information from the player or even outright

⁶ That is, videogames played from a third-person perspective where the player observes the playable character moving and acting within the world through an external, virtual camera.

⁷ Except in the rare case of diegetic menus such as *Dead Space* (Visceral 2008) where the menu and Heads-Up Display are presented as actual, projected objects within the game’s fictional world, visible to both player and playable character.

lie, such as Cloud in *Final Fantasy VII* (SquareSoft 1997) who unreliably narrates past events leading up to the beginning of the game's story. While the playing of a videogame is predominately that of enactment, the player-as-actor analogy conflates the roles of player and playable character into a single, assimilated role rather than acknowledging the distinct contributions each make to the event of videogame play. It renders the intrinsic, intricate interrelationships between the player and the playable character untraceable.

The Conflation of You

Above, several videogame reviews highlighted the conflation of the roles of player and playable character in videogame discourses through the common use of second-person address. In the review of *Ms Splosion Man*, "you" explode off walls to propel "yourself" into the air. In the review of *Red Faction: Armageddon*, slabs of destroyed building fall around "your" head. However, while "you" can be assumed to be the review reader and potential videogame player, both reviews are describing actions performed by and in the context of the body of the playable character—not the player. For Wilson, "this kind of critical discourse, which mixes avatar and player in its address, would be fairly mysterious unless players shared a sense of immersion in fictional worlds" ("Gameplay" 221). However, it works the other way, too: the sense of immersion that players share in fictional worlds has led to a conflating of the roles of the player and playable character into this single, unified "you". While such closeness is (and should be) aimed for as an optimal goal in both videogame design and play, an uncritical conflation of player and playable character prevents any scholarly analysis of how the relationship between the player and playable character actually functions within the videogame text. If a videogame draws the player into a prolonged intimacy with its world through systems of images, imperatives, and temporalities (Wilson, "Gameplay" 225) then the player's relationship with the playable character is central to this intimacy being achieved. While compressing the player and the playable character into a single entity makes sense, as it is indeed an intimate hybridisation of the two that acts within the videogame's fictional world, this "you" must be unpacked and its complex *interrelations* between player and playable character exposed if the relationship is to be properly understood. The two may be intimate, but they are not interchangeable. Like the two unique, individual persons that make up a couple, both player

and playable character shape the relationship between them, the shape of “you”, the shape of the entity that *enacts and acts* within the videogame text.

Looking further at the common use of the second-person address in and around digital texts broadly and videogames specifically, Jill Walker notes that “[d]eictic words like ‘you’ [...] have no meaning except in relation to other worlds and to a context. Their power lies in their emptiness” (37). Walker demonstrates how direct, second-person address invokes “the rhetoric of participation”:

You’re walking down the street, when someone calls out “Hey, you!” How can you help but turn? Of course you assume that you’re the ‘you’, for an instant at least. You turn because the word YOU is empty in itself. The vacuum inside it sucks you in, filling itself with you, and it will take a moment before you realise that you may not belong there. (Walker 37)

In digital texts, however, “you” are expected to answer by playing the role that is offered to you by the text. “This role corresponds to the text’s construction of ‘you’ as both narratee and a protagonist of sorts. In the game *Deus Ex* ‘you are J.D Denton’; in a MUD [multi-user dungeon] you create your own ‘character’ but still according to strict rules” (Walker 39). Just like Murray and Jenkins, then, Walker sees videogame play as enacting a role. Just as Murray sees videogames as not a suspension of disbelief but actively making believe, Walker shows that videogame play is an active act of “*letting yourself believe* that you’re really in the halls you see displayed on the screen” (44, original emphasis). Videogames consist of a double play where the player is simultaneously required to remain outside the fictional world of a videogame while believing fully that they are actually part of it. “In the rhetoric surrounding computer games [...] the difference between *playing* and *being* the protagonist is blurred. There is a brand of total identification that appears to be a mark of excellence” (Walker 44). It is this blurring that the above player-as-actor analogies accept—and perhaps enforce—without critically exploring. The relationship between the player and playable character is an intimate one, and the distinction between the two is minuscule, but a distance does exist that the masking metaphors fail to account for.

A better analogy is needed, one that accounts for the distinction between the player and the playable character as well as the multitude of intricate ways that the two interrelate. Such an analogy is the relationship between a puppeteer and a puppet. The

puppeteer still enacts the role of the puppet much like the actor does the character; the puppeteer still chooses actions from within a set of possible actions; the puppeteer still plays a role within the fictional world that the puppet exists within, but the puppeteer does all this from a distance, externally, through physical and tangible relations with the puppet. Unlike the masked actor, the puppeteer typically exists beyond the fictional world projected by the stage and controls the puppet from a distance via a network of strings. The puppeteer's ability to control and enact the puppet's role is only as good as their literal, physical relations with the puppet. Such an analogy does risk the assumption that the player-as-puppeteer is the character-as-puppet's master, but the puppeteer is both liberated and constrained by the abilities of the puppet. The actor acts how the character should act; the puppeteer can only perform the actions that the puppet is capable of performing. Further, while a masked actor would still be limited by the actions of their own body—an actor moving their arm can only ever be enacted by the character as a movement of the arm—a puppeteer's movements and actions are *translated* by the strings into any range of actions possible for a particular puppet. Similarly, the playable character of a videogame's fictional world need not be anthropomorphic but may be a spaceship as in *Spacewar!*, a simple paddle as in *Pong* (Atari 1972), or a car as in *Gran Turismo* (Polyphony 1997). The relationship between the player and the playable character is reflexive—it *does something* to the player's intentions and actions. While the player is indeed enacting a role within the videogame's fictional world, neither the player nor the character are in complete control of the other; both are dependent on the affordances and constraints of the other. Thus, we are able to make clear the difference between “playing” and “being” the protagonist that Walker rightfully notes the player-as-actor analogies—and videogame discourses generally—tend to blur. The player exists outside the fictional world of the videogame but, through the mediations of the playable character, they extend their actions and engage with the fictional world. “You have to enact the [videogame] text's performative [role] in order to play” (Walker 45).

A player-as-puppeteer analogy avoids implications of story and narrative implied by the player-as-actor analogies (concerns of narrative are central to both Jenkins and Murray). Puppet play can be anything from elaborate, scripted stage shows with rigid traditions and little room for improvisation to the unscripted, unbound play between children with

handcrafted sock-puppets. Similarly, there are countless different ways that the coupling between player and playable character can be formed, and the enactment of the playable character may have nothing to do with a scripted narrative, even though it takes place within a fictional world.

You feel pleasure in playing a role. It's a pleasure that is related but not identical to narrative pleasure. When you read a narrative you enjoy being a voyeur. You are driven to read it all, and reading it all, the story ends; your desire is dead. When you play a [video]game [...] you are more than a voyeur. *You enjoy that feeling of being part of the text, part of the machine.* (Walker 46-47, emphasis added)

The player does not enter the text by becoming the playable character but is able to become part of the videogame text through their relationship with an "other" who is the playable character. This is a semantic but crucial difference in how the player's engagement with the videogame is comprehended. The relationship between the player and the playable character exists between the fictional world of the videogame and the actual world of the player, and the two actors are linked across this divide as part of the assemblage that is the videogame text. By playing the videogame the player becomes an extension of and a crucial component of the text. They are shaped by the fictional world through their relationship with the playable character as much as their actions, as translated through the playable character, shape the fictional world.

Chapter Two: Locating the Player-Character Hybrid

“No one has ever heard of a collective that did not mobilize heaven and earth in its composition, along with bodies and souls, property and law, gods and ancestors, power and beliefs, beasts and fictional beings” (Latour, Modern 107).

The player and the playable character are displaced from each other but still remain intimately related through tangible, traceable connections. Paradoxically, this means the player and the playable character must be understood as simultaneously separate from and connected to the other; each is distinct but neither is disconnected. Just as the puppet and the puppeteer do not share one body, neither do the player and the playable character. Rather, it is through a network of mediating relationships extending through both the actual and fictional worlds that the player interacts with the playable character and comprehends the fictional world beyond. “Something happens along the strings that allows the marionette to move” (Latour, *Reassembling* 214). The videogame player does not “become” the playable character in an act of assimilation or dominance, but together they form an ensemble, a collective, a hybrid *in their relating* that acts as a singular agent within the fictional world of the videogame—composed of both player and playable character but irreducible to neither.

While the previous chapter exposed the intricate network of relationships that exist between the player and the playable character across actual and fictional worlds, this chapter demonstrates how these networks can be traced and how we can account for the ways in which each mediates and configures the other. It explores this interrelationship of player and playable character within an understanding of videogame play as cybernetic, where agency is situated with neither an intentional player nor a determining machine but ebbs and flows between the two. This raises questions of intentionality and identity that will then be addressed in the second section, showing that a player’s agency within the fictional world of the videogame exists only in the meaningful relationships that the player is able to build with and through the playable character by forming a hybrid with them—a literal cyborg of organic, technological, and fictional bodies. Lastly, with an understanding of the player-character hybrid as an actor within a cybernetic circuit of videogame play alongside

other human/nonhuman, organic/technological, actual/fictional hybrids, this chapter examines how it is the player and the playable character are able to couple so intimately. The player does not relate to the playable character sympathetically—where the player would enact the playable character how they themselves would act—but empathetically, across distance—where the player enacts the playable character how they believe that character would act. By this stage, the player-as-puppeteer analogy that helped us deconstruct the relationship will begin to unravel, as it will become unclear just who is the puppeteer and who is the puppet.

Cybernetic Play and Playful Nonhumans

Chapter One demonstrated that a videogame constructs a fictional world audiovisually, one embedded with imperatives that afford and constrain certain playful behaviours. However, Chapter One also demonstrated the fallacies of uncritically accepting the player's engagement with this world as merely entering the world "as" the playable character. Such an understanding does not account for the complex relationships that the player forms *with* the videogame. Walker shows that the pleasure in enacting a role in the videogame's fictional world is one of *becoming part of* the text—not entering it but extending it (Walker 47). Similarly, Atkins and Kryzwinska note that "the text has no life of its own without the player engagement; without the player a game is simply dead code" (6). This close coupling of human and technological has been explored by various scholars through the conceptual framework of cybernetics.

For Lister et al, to describe videogame play as cybernetic "is to suggest a much more intense and intimate relationship between the human and the machine [...] in which neither partner is dominant [and where] clear distinctions between them become unsustainable" (206). Similarly, Kennedy understands videogame play as "networks and flows of energy which are entirely interdependent [...] there is no separation of individuals and machines but only a collective process of engagement where action and reaction flow in a circuit of technologized bodies and their pleasure" (126-27). For Giddings, videogame play is definitively cybernetic as "a flow of information between organic and inorganic nodes, the initiation of which cannot be identified in either the player or the machine" (5). And, writing together, Giddings and Kennedy state that "gameplay is an intense event, a set of intimate

circuits between human bodies and minds, computer hardware and algorithms and affordances of the virtual worlds of videogames” (19). Across these idealised accounts we can see a concern with an intimate coupling within videogame play between humans and nonhumans, flesh and machine, actual worlds and fictional worlds, where one cannot be considered in isolation from or in control of the other. However, to not account for each actor’s unique attributes and contributions is to risk the same simplification as seen in the player-as-actor analogy—the mediating effects of the separate actors on each other is disavowed, and one part stands in for the whole while the other is ignored. Instead, Wilson argues that this splicing of human and technological bodies and worlds requires

an ontology—a series of ontologies—that can conceive of the moment of play as simultaneously social, mechanical, neither, both [...] This is to say that when we begin to see the moment of gameplay as a hybrid one—one where human and machine, play and code, text and reading, producer and consumer cannot be meaningfully distinguished—we can then begin to see that its unfixed, unstriated forms of play demand a hybrid aesthetics. (“Odyssey Renewed” 8)

Such a “hybrid aesthetic” demands that an analysis of a videogame text traces the intimate, intricate, and cybernetic networks formed between player and videogame, the strings that hold the puppet and puppeteer together.

In such a network, the player becomes a literal and vivid instantiation of Donna Haraway’s cyborg (Giddings 4; Kennedy 127); “[n]ot only as a human subject in a technologised environment, but rather as the human as one element in an event assembled from and generated by both humans and nonhuman entities” (Lister et al 306). Haraway defines the cyborg as “a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (149); in the relationship between humans and machines it is not clear who makes and who is made (Haraway 177). Haraway’s cyborg transgresses the boundaries between human and machine, and exposes a much wider array of dualisms that Haraway sees as reinforcing patriarchal dominance in Western society such as “self/other, mind/body, culture/nature, male/female, civilized/primitive, reality/appearance, whole/part, agent/resource, maker/made, active/passive, right/wrong, truth/illusion, total/partial, God/man” (Haraway 177). Through the cyborg metaphor, Haraway deconstructs an organic/machine dualism specifically to critique all dualism broadly and

argues for identities to be understood as always “contradictory, partial, and strategic” (Haraway 155). Haraway’s interest in the cyborg is primarily to argue that the various strands of feminism should not attempt to rally around a central, unified identity of “female” but through an *affinity* of necessarily incomplete, fragmented identities (Haraway 155). Similarly, the act of videogame play takes place in the network of contradictory and partial, human and technological actors that should not be considered as identifiable wholes in themselves but as contradictory parts that are only whole in their affinity. There is no videogame text without a player, and there is no player without a videogame to be played.

The lack of distinction between human and nonhuman actors in videogame play also resonates with the work of actor-network theorists such as Bruno Latour. Latour contests that the “Constitution” of modern thought misguidedly separates into purified spheres a Society of subjects-in-themselves and a Nature of objects-in-themselves (Latour, *Modern* 107). Much as Haraway uses the relationship between humans and technology to break down her dualisms, Latour shows that subjects and objects are not distinct but proliferate as hybrid *subject-objects* that the modern Constitution conceals:

In the middle, where nothing is supposed to be happening, there is almost everything. And at the extremes—which according to [modern thought] houses the origin of all forces, Nature and Society, Universality and Locality—there is nothing except purified agencies that serve as constitutional guarantees for the whole.

(Latour, *Modern* 123)

Rather, for Latour, “Nature and Society have no more existence than West or East” (*Modern* 85). Every subject and object falls somewhere in between the purified extremes as a hybrid of the two. All humans and nonhumans exist as collectives formed through their relationships with each other. Latour calls these collectives ‘quasi-objects’ or—as used through this thesis—hybrids. Latour argues that a human subject cannot be understood without accounting for its relations with nonhuman objects, stating that “by seeking to isolate its form from those it churns together, one does not defend humanism, one loses it” (*Modern* 137).

Once human exceptionalism is put aside, the most crucial (and contentious) consequence of Latour’s stance can be understood: all subjects and objects possess agency—not in what they intend to do but in what they allow other quasi-objects to do.

Agency, as understood by Latour, is not an attribute exclusive to intentional humans, living organisms, or even to animate objects; rather, *all* subjects and objects have agency in the way they relate to and mediate the actions of other subjects and objects, and contribute to different quasi-objects. “[E]verytime you want to know what a non-human does, simply imagine what other humans or non-humans would have to do were this character not present” (Latour, “Missing Masses”). Such a claim challenges basic assumptions of the autonomy of human intentionality and calls for a flatter ontology of the networks of relationships between subjects and objects that can account for not just how subjects construct objects, but how objects construct the subject (Latour, *Modern* 82).

To restore this symmetry of agency between subjects and objects, the mediating role of objects in the hybrids they construct with subjects has to be accounted for. When the agency of an object is disavowed, it is treated as a mere intermediary that simply “transports, transfers, transmits” an action from one Constitutional pole to the other. To account for the agency of objects and subjects alike, they must be acknowledged as mediators. A mediator “is an original event and *creates what it translates as well as the entities between which it plays the mediating role*” (Latour, *Modern* 77-78, emphasis added). By acknowledging the way all subjects are mediated by the actions and existence of all the objects they mediate—rather than assuming these objects are mere intermediaries doing precisely what the subject desires them to do—networks of agency and action become visible and traceable. Taken together, Haraway’s cyborg and Latour’s hybrid show that the phenomena of videogame play cannot be understood as simply the intentional actions of the player as an active, human subject over the videogame as a technological, intermediary object. Rather, a cybernetic network of relating, mediating, contradicting, partial, and hybridising actors—both human and nonhuman—all come together to create an event of videogame play. Videogame play begins in the middle, in the relationship that is the coming together of player and videogame. “The human is in the delegation itself, in the pass, in the continuous change of forms” (Latour, *Modern* 138).

Understanding videogame play as cybernetic shifts understandings of its pleasure from primarily that of mastery *over* the game towards one of participation *with* the game. This subverts more traditional readings of videogame play that understands players as independent agents determined to “beat” the videogame through tasks such as completing

the videogame's narrative goals or achieving the highest score. Such "mastery" over the videogame requires the player to understand the imperatives that afford and constrain certain styles of play and to alter their behaviour accordingly to fit within those parameters. "Games configure their players, allowing progression through the game only if the players recognize what they are being prompted to do, and comply within these coded instructions" (Giddings and Kennedy 14). Understanding the pleasure of videogame play as the player's mastery over the videogame does not account for the mediations of the videogame on the player's behaviour and thus does not trace the whole network of interactions between player and videogame. Conversely, understanding videogame play as cybernetic, with agency existing in the interrelations between human and nonhuman actors, allows a recalibration of the player's role as one of participation. Quantum Theory's *Heavy Rain* (2010), for instance, is often referred to—positively by some and negatively by others—as an 'interactive film', meaning that the player's interaction with the fictional world is more passive than the classical videogame experience. The player's interactions are typically limited to walking around a restricted space (such as a single room of a house) and pressing buttons that corresponds with on-screen markers; for instance, an 'X' next to a television set suggests that pressing X on the controller will play an animation of the playable character turning on the television. Different narrative endings exist based on different choices made by the player and the playable character throughout the game, but *Heavy Rain* can never be "failed" and a conclusion will always be reached despite the player's choices. The pleasures of playing *Heavy Rain* could not be easily defined in terms of difficulty or mastery as there is nothing to master beyond choosing whether or not to press X next to the television set. The player does not control the world of *Heavy Rain* but becomes a part of it—an active and participatory component of the videogame that, reflexively, is also acted upon.

Understanding videogame play as cybernetic straddles the border between social and technological determinism where both player and videogame are seen as having some effect, some agency, over the other. It shows that the pleasure of mastering a videogame is but a subset of the broader, more-applicable pleasure of participating with a videogame.

[A]ctivity and passivity are not opposites in videogame play but fluctuations in the circuit, and thus [...] a new conceptual language is needed to attend to both the

operations of nonhuman agency and the human pleasures of lack of agency, of being controlled, of being *acted upon*. (Giddings and Kennedy 30, original emphasis)

The player may “choose” how to play the videogame, but such choices are always influenced and mediated by the videogame’s hardware, software, the imperatives embedded in the videogame’s fictional world, the player’s embodied experience of that world through the mediation of the playable character, and countless other actors. An act within the fictional world of the videogame, then, cannot be traced without recognising both the human and nonhuman mediators that both create and translate it. Any analysis that privileges either the role of a subjective, intentional player or an objective, determining videogame disavows the mediating role of the other. “Both humans and nonhumans are the playful objects here” (Giddings and Kennedy 21). Nonhuman actors in the cybernetic circuit of videogame play—such as the controller, the code, the playable character—are not intermediaries through which the player “transmits” actions and intentions into the game’s fictional world unaffected, but *mediators* that have a say in translating and creating the actions and intentions of the player. With these nonhuman actors, the player forms hybrids in their reflexive mediation—such as player-controller, player-code, and player-character.

Becoming the Player-Character Hybrid⁸

If the act of videogame play is a cybernetic one where agency exists in the networks of interrelationships between human and nonhuman actors, if the player engages with the videogame text by becoming a participatory component of the text, and if, as outlined in Chapter One, the player does not enter the fictional world of the videogame but engages with and comprehends it through the bodily experiences of the playable character, then the player’s engagement with the videogame’s fictional world cannot be adequately described without accounting for the mediating role of the playable character. Gee notes that the relationship the player forms with the playable character transcends similar relationships formed with characters in novels or films as

⁸ In conceptualising the relationship between the player and playable character as a hybrid, I am indebted to Kevin Veale’s foundational discussion on the hybrid nature of videogame play (28-41).

it is both *active* (the player actively does things) and *reflexive*, in the sense that once the player has made some choices about certain parameters about the virtual character, the virtual character is now developed in a way that sets certain parameters about what the player can do. (58, original emphasis)

Together, through an intimate coupling of agencies and bodies, of acting and being acted upon, the player and the playable character form a cyborg, a hybrid, of actual and fictional bodies that act as a singular agent within the fictional world.

The playable character is the player's means of both navigating the fictional world and comprehending that world's imperatives. James Newman understands playable characters as bodies of capabilities and constraints, "equipment to be utilised in the gameworld by the player. They are vehicles". However, bafflingly, Newman disregards the representational, audiovisual aspect of the playable character, stating that "Lara Croft [of *Tomb Raider* (Core 1996)] is defined less by appearance than by the fact that 'she' allows the player to jump distance x , while the ravine in front of us is larger than that, so we better start thinking of a new way round" (Newman). Newman believes that Lara Croft's fictional representation in the game as a female human being is irrelevant to how he plays, even though the very concept of "lives" or being able to "die" in a videogame is tied to notions of the playable character's mortality within the fictional world. In disregarding the representative aspects of Lara Croft (as a human female capable of jumping a certain distance but also capable of being injured or killed if she were to miss such a jump), Newman makes the same mistake as Juul in assuming that a videogame's rules and fiction can be easily separated. Just as a videogame's rules are understood by the player as imperatives embedded within and as the fictional world, so too is that world understood by the player by how the playable character *embodies* those imperatives. In the world of *Tomb Raider*, a human will die if they fall in a pit of spikes; as such, the fact the playable character is fictionally a human is significant to the player's comprehensions of what is dangerous to their engagement with the fictional world.

The player understands the fictional world of the videogame *intersubjectively* through the mediation of the playable character's fictional body. It is in this way that Bob Rehak defines the playable character in relation to the player as "a perceived world and a sense of control; a moving map, like a projection on the inside of a sphere, and outside it

the intention, attention, urgency, and passion we bring to our virtual pursuits” (150-51). Newman rightly understands the playable character as a vehicle through which the player navigates the videogame’s world, but just as a human in a car engages a freeway differently from a human on foot, a human on a motorcycle, or a car without a human, the playable character with which the player engages the videogame mediates the player’s comprehension and interpretation of the fictional world. “The virtual character redounds [sic] back on the player and affects his or her future actions” (Gee 58).

Giddings and Kennedy label this interrelation between player and playable character the “avatar-player loop” and note that it functions as one of videogame play’s “cybernetic subsystems” (23). Agency does not sit solely with the player or with the playable character but ebbs and flows between the two in the playing and construction of the videogame text:

[Agency] is a spectrum and players’ relationship to the avatar and the world is responsive/possessive, containing complex elements of both a passive responsive ‘being acted upon’ and a sense of possession of that action—a performative possession: ‘I am doing,’ ‘I am being,’ as well as ‘I am being made to do’. (Giddings and Kennedy 28)

To account for this flow of agency between the player and the playable character, the playable character needs to be understood, in Latour’s terms, not as a passive intermediary transferring the player’s intentions unchanged into the videogame’s world but as a mediator that translates—and also helps to create—the player’s actions. The player does not simply put on a passive mask of the character and act out its role, but exists in a tight coupling with the playable character, becoming an extension of the playable character while also being extended by it.

The playable character allows the player to engage with the fictional world in ways that the player is not able to do without the character. Newman is able to navigate the world of *Tomb Raider* by interacting with Lara Croft, and he understands where he should and should not jump because of his comprehension of Lara Croft as a fictional being within that world. Neither the player nor the playable character is able to perform the action without the other. Lara Croft cannot jump the canyon without Newman holding the controller and pressing the right buttons at the right time, and Newman cannot jump the canyon himself as he exists beyond the fictional world. Just like Haraway’s identities, both

player and playable character are only partial in themselves and are completed in their affinity.

The coming together of player and playable character that produces the player-character hybrid is a *synecdochic* relationship. Vivian Sobchack makes a distinction between figurative relationships of metonymy and synecdoche, arguing that while metonymic relations bring together two objects that each constitute “an absolutely separate whole”, a synecdochic relationship “constructs relations of connection through which two objects *‘form an ensemble, a physical or metaphysical whole, the existence or idea of one being included in the existence or idea of the other’*” (Sobchack 213, original emphasis). Sobchack uses the example of her own body’s relationship with her prosthetic leg not as a detached, independent object that she “plugs” into but as part of her body:

My ‘real’ leg and my ‘prosthetic’ leg are not usually lived as two absolutely different and separate things since they function as an ensemble and are each a part of my body participating in the whole movement that gets me from here to there; thus, they are *organically* related (in practice if not material) and are, to a great degree, *reversible* each with the other. (Sobchack 214, original emphasis)

Sobchack’s flesh and the prosthetic leg form a synecdochic relationship where the body is formed in the ensemble of the two actors. Likewise, the videogame player and playable character function not as two separate, whole entities but as a synecdochic ensemble, a hybrid, that shapes and is shaped by the experience, action, and identity of each.

As Chapter One showed, the player and the playable character cannot be considered as distinct wholes, separable from the other, but neither can they be considered a singular identity. To consider them as either is to disavow what makes the player and the character different as well as the unique contributions each makes to the relationship. This paradox is resolved when we understand that the player and playable character are fractured, incomplete identities coupled in a synecdochic ensemble. “One is too few, but two are too many” (Haraway 177). The player and the playable character are not One but neither are they Two; in their affinity—in their intimate relating that transgresses and blurs the border between them—they are a hybrid. It is as part of this player-character hybrid that the player engages bodily with the fictional world of the videogame. Not by entering it, but by coupling from a distance with the playable character that exists within it. Understanding the

relationship between player and playable character as a hybridisation allows us to trace the mediations and flows of agency between both actors present in the event of videogame play. The unique contributions of each can be accounted for while neither is privileged.

Yet, just as Sobchack experiences the ensemble constructed by her real and prosthetic limbs as not some hybrid or cyborg but simply as her own body, the player does not experience the player-character hybrid as some “other” that they are just a segment of, but rather the player comprehends themselves *as* the player-character hybrid. The player actively believes that they are in complete control of (and as) the playable character while simultaneously opting to accept the parameters imposed by the playable character’s fictional body. This plays into what Don Ihde calls the “double desire” that exists as a contradiction in all human-technology relations:

On the one side is a wish for total transparency, total embodiment, for the technology to truly ‘become me.’ Were this possible, it would be equivalent to there being no technology, for total transparency would *be* my body and senses.... The other side is in the desire to have the power, the *transformation* that the technology makes available. Only by using the technology is my bodily power enhanced and magnified [...] The desire is, at best, contradictory. I want the transformation that the technology allows, but I want it in such a way that I am basically unaware of its presence. I want it in such a way that it becomes me. Such a desire both secretly *rejects* what technologies are and overlooks the transformational effects that are necessarily tied to human-technology relations. (qtd. in Sobchack 171-72, original emphasis)

In the event of videogame play this double desire is inherent in the player’s comprehension of the player-character hybrid. The player feels like they *are* the character inside the fictional world but at the same time consciously remains some distance from the character. As shown by Walker in the previous chapter, suspension of disbelief in videogame play is actively “*letting yourself believe* that you’re really in the halls you see displayed on the screen” (Walker 44, original emphasis). The player does not forget their own physical existence in the actual world, even while they let themselves believe they move in the fictional world through and as the playable character. The player of *Space Invaders* (Taito 1978) will cognitively know that they are, indeed, not inside a spaceship shooting aliens, but

if asked by a passerby what they are doing, it would not be strange for the player to respond “shooting aliens” as though it is they themselves shooting aliens and not the playable character on the screen with which they have formed a mediated, intimate relationship.

The player “becomes” the player-character hybrid by actively ignoring the crucial role of the playable character in shaping the hybrid and, simultaneously, being consciously aware of it. It is this conflation of actors, roles, and bodies that is essential to videogame play’s sense of immersion that has bled uncritically into videogame discourses and scholarship through the second-person address as examined in Chapter One. However, while the videogame player is able (if not required) to believe they are a blend of their own intentions and the playable character represented (or suggested) by the screen, the videogame scholar must account for the contributions made by both player *and* playable character in the construction of the player-character hybrid and its significance to the shape of the videogame’s text. To ignore either the player or the playable character’s mediation of the other is to not fully comprehend the player’s complex relationship with and as the videogame text, nor the meaning that this relationship produces.

An Empathetic Coupling

More than simply understanding that the player and playable character merge in a player-character hybrid, the videogame scholar must understand *how* this merger occurs within specific videogame texts. While the transgressed border concerned by most cybernetic accounts of videogame play is that of flesh and machine, the border (primarily though certainly not exclusively) at stake between the player and the playable character is that between the actual world of the player’s physical body and the fictional world of the character’s body. The player never leaves the actual world to “enter” the fictional world of the videogame; the player never abandons their physical body to take over the character’s but instead forms a hybrid across the border between worlds that neither player nor character can transgress alone. It is through the player-character hybrid that the player is able to cross the fourth-wall of the videogame’s fictional world, engage with, and become an actual extension of the videogame text. For Murray, the “mask” we put on when we enter the videogame’s fictional world (what we can now conceptually recalibrate as the active player-character hybrid that the player voluntarily enters into and not the passive

role of the playable character) “creates the boundary of the immersive reality and signals that we are role-playing rather than acting as ourselves. The mask is a threshold marker [...] it gives us our entry into the artificial world and also keeps some part of ourselves outside of it” (Murray 113). Similarly, Melanie Swalwell understands play—in both its digital and nondigital forms—as “*approximating* some aspects of a role or object; it is a *partial becoming*” (84, emphasis added). In the player-character hybrid, both the player and playable character become a partial approximation of the other. Gee discusses this as a play of identities, stating that “[p]layers [project] an identity onto their virtual character based both on their own values and on what the game has taught them about what such a character should or might be and become” (58). When the player acts as the player-character within the fictional world, they do not behave as themselves, *but as they believe that character would act* as communicated by the character’s fictional existence and embodiment of the world’s imperatives.

Rehak notes that the playable character acts as a “second body” for the player and argues that “our virtual realities become genuinely gripping only when avatarial ‘lives’ are at stake. We accept dual embodiment only when that second body is at risk” (153). While this statement is reductive, it highlights that the player acts in a videogame based on how the world will affect the playable character, not how it will affect them. Even when Newman argues that Lara Croft’s audiovisual representation is insignificant to how he plays *Tomb Raider*, he plays the game in a certain way so that his enactment of Lara does not die or suffer injury. In this way, the coupling between player and playable character is best thought of as *empathetic*. Allison Landsberg notes that empathy is about negotiating distances, about *the lack of* identity between actors: “[w]hile sympathy [...] relies upon an essentialism of identification, empathy recognises the alterity of identification.” (246). Understanding the player-character hybrid as one constructed through the player’s empathy with the playable character can account for the distance traversed by the actions and mediations between player and playable character, between bodies and worlds, and also for how the player is able to actively believe they are a different being in a different world. For Petri Lankoski, empathy acknowledges not just how the player and the playable character are the same, but the significance in how they are different:

Empathy as a process can explain why this emotion coupling [between player and playable character] happens. Empathy, here, [refers] to a mechanism that puts a player's affective state in relation to the state of another agent (Decety & Jackson, 2004) namely, a game character. [...] Empathy can be used to explain, for example, why we fear for a character when it is in danger. (295)

The relationship between the player and playable character across the actual and fictional worlds is not one based on sympathy—where the player would act as they themselves would act in the situation of the playable character—but one of empathy—where the player enacts the playable character based on their own personal interpretation of *what the character would do* based on the character's context within the fictional world. The player does not enter the videogame's fictional world as themselves, but forms a relationship with the playable character empathetically where they partially become the playable character and the playable character, too, partially becomes the player.

Understanding the player-character hybrid as being formed through empathy allows for the analysis of a far more diverse range of playable characters. The being that is the playable character is not necessarily an anthropomorphic one, one tied to a narrative or consistent world, or even necessarily one visible on the screen. It could be a rounded, narrative-driven character such as Nathan Drake in *Uncharted: Drake's Fortune*; a car as in *Burnout Paradise* (Criterion 2008); a spaceship as in *Space Invaders*; an unseen but assumed human actor as in first-person shooters such as *Half-Life* (Valve 1998) or “god games” such as *Sim City* (Maxis 1989);⁹ or simply a line of pixels such as the paddle that rebounds the ball in *Pong*. If the player-character relationship were one of sympathy, the player would struggle to engage with any if not all of these characters as they would have little in common ideologically or bodily. But through empathy they can relate specifically because of the tensions, contradictions, and differences between player and playable character. The player's actions are mediated, translated, and ultimately created by who—or *what*—the playable character is.

⁹ Lankoski notes that the unseen playable characters of first-person shooters are constructed by allusion through the actions and reactions of other characters in the fictional world (301). The unseen playable characters of god games can be similarly understood, albeit in a less bodily sense.

Because characters react to the player's commands differently, *players need to adapt* to their [playable character] and to take into account the qualities and skills of the different characters [...] Consequently, a player will project intentions onto the character, and those projected intentions are likely to influence the perceived personality of the character. (Lankoski 298, emphasis added)

The player need not like nor agree with the playable character in order to enact them. The player mediates, shapes, and creates the playable character who, in turn, mediates, shapes, and creates the player. This back-and forth of information, agency, and mediation is the cybernetic circuit between the player and the playable character that make up the player-character hybrid.

A critical analysis that hopes to examine the player's textual engagement with a videogame and the production of meaning from that played event must understand the player's engagement with and through the playable character. Not just as a character in a narrative but as an embodied being of affordances and constraints that open up or make preferable certain types of engagement with the fictional world while closing off or making undesirable others. While the player forms a player-character hybrid with the playable character in all forms of videogame play, no prescriptive shape of "all" player-character hybrids can be defined. Rather, as a synecdochic and empathetic relationship, a close analysis of a videogame text must account for the specific attributes and mediations of that videogame's playable character and its mediation on the player through the player-character hybrid. To play a videogame, to construct a videogame text, is not to enact the role of the playable character but to partially become the playable character by actively becoming the player-character hybrid across differences and distances. Just as puppet and puppeteer act as a singular entity between two bodies, the player actively lets themselves believe that they *are* the unique combination of themselves and the playable character across identities, bodies, intentions, and worlds.

Chapter Three: Liberty Cities

“We can pick the game, Niko Bellic, but we cannot change the rules” (Dimitri Rascalov, Grand Theft Auto IV).

Players, playable characters, designers, controllers, imperatives, sounds, visuals, and all the other human and nonhuman, actual and fictional actors mobilised in videogame play contribute distinctively to a cybernetically constructed videogame text (Giddings and Kennedy 11). To prescribe a general shape to all videogame texts or player-character hybrids is to disavow the specific contributions made by each actor. Rather, when engaging in textual videogame scholarship, Atkins and Kryzwinska stress that the academic critic must “step back from the maelstrom of imagination of potential, and look with care at what the individual game represents [...] how it communicates its meaning, how it functions as played event, and how engagement with it through play generates pleasure” (2). As such, the framework constructed by the previous chapters does not prescribe top-down attributes inherent to all player-characters but makes possible a bottom-up approach that looks at a specific videogame text as it is actually played and traces the networks of mediation that translate and create both the player’s intentions and behaviour and the playable character’s fictional existence. To comprehend the production of meaning in a videogame text is to account for not just the player’s configuration of the videogame but also the videogame’s configuration of the player.

This chapter analyses Rockstar North’s *Grand Theft Auto IV* with a close focus on the role of the playable character, Niko Bellic, towards the player’s perception of *Grand Theft Auto IV*’s fictional world and understanding of how to act within it. Analysis of this text demonstrates how the theories forwarded by the previous two chapters can be deployed to trace the cybernetic flow of agency that contributes to an act of videogame play. In *Grand Theft Auto IV* the player comes to understand the game’s fictional world as a vast, subsuming metropolis through understanding Niko’s own contextualised place within it. The videogame communicates this to the player through the player’s control of Niko as both a fictional being existing within that metropolis as well as an embodiment of the fictional world’s imperatives. Further, this analysis of a videogame as actually played will show that

the coupling of player and playable character is not just between partial identities, but different and contradictory ones. In *Grand Theft Auto IV*, there exists a tension between Niko as presented by the game's narrative and Niko as enacted by the player that threatens to disrupt the player-character hybrid. This will expose the dynamic and volatile nature of the player-character hybrid and how *Grand Theft Auto IV* contains its instability through the player-character hybrid itself. Finally, by tracing the network of relationships between the player, the playable character, and the videogame, this chapter will have read *Grand Theft Auto IV* in a way that it is commonly experienced but which a videogame criticism that privileges the player as the producer of meaning is unable to account for. That is, it will account for not just how the playable character could mediate the player's experience but how Niko Bellic actually contributes to player-character hybrids in different instances of *Grand Theft Auto IV* play¹⁰.

Fresh off the Boat: Niko Bellic and the Foreign Player

Grand Theft Auto IV (henceforth referred to as *GTA IV*) begins with a cut scene of a cargo ship pulling into Broker Navy Yard towards the southeast of Liberty City, *GTA IV*'s fictional homage to the actual world's New York City. On the ship is *GTA IV*'s playable character, Niko Bellic. For the majority of players, their first steps into Liberty City will coincide with Niko's. Niko, much like the first-time player of *GTA IV*, is a foreigner, an outsider who has never before been to Liberty City and only knows of it as an idea, a concept, a land of opportunities and (supposedly) realised dreams. For Niko, Liberty City represents a chance at redemption, a chance to leave behind a dark and violent past and begin a new life. For the new player, too, this place is somewhere new, embedded with playful opportunities that are yet to be realised. In Liberty City, Niko only knows his cousin, Roman, who Niko believes is "living the dream," as Niko explains to his shipmate during the opening cut scene: "He's got the lot—house, women, cars, parties." In truth, though, Roman is living in a rodent-infested apartment in the poor, immigrant district of Hove Beach, struggling to run a small cab company and being harassed by loan sharks.

¹⁰ It must also be noted that in this analysis only the single-player component of *Grand Theft Auto IV* will be considered. The player still engages with *Grand Theft Auto IV*'s multiplayer game modes through a player-character hybrid, but this hybrid is constructed and mobilised in substantially different ways than that of the single-player game and thus falls beyond the scope of this chapter.

The player-character's first task off the boat is to drive a drunken Roman through unfamiliar streets back to his apartment. Crucial to the player's engagement with Liberty City through Niko is that Liberty City is an "open world". Rather than the progressive, consecutive stages of many (though not all) videogames, Liberty City is a singular, consistent, and continuous space. All missions, cut scenes, and events occur in locations within the singular fictional world of Liberty City, and the player-character may plausibly navigate to any location within the city at any time they wish. Liberty City's streets do not match New York's identically, but it works to capture the vibe and aesthetic of its actual-world counterpart and also captures New York's dwarfing, bustling scope. Few players will fail to notice the parallels between Liberty City's Star Junction, Middle Park, and the Statue of Happiness and New York's Times Square, Central Park, and the Statue of Liberty. The similarities extend to the individual suburbs, such as the overhead railways and perpetually shaded streets of Broker (Brooklyn), the skyscrapers and suits of The Exchange (Wall Street), and the ghettos and tenement houses of North Holland (Harlem). The city is huge, and it is quite possible, if not probable, for a player to play *GTA IV* for dozens of hours without visiting every location.

Niko's story is presented to the player within this world through a series of missions that the player commences by navigating to specific locations in Liberty City. Once the player-character enters the highlighted area of the world, a cut scene plays that explains what Niko must do to complete the mission. This often gives shape to the background of Niko and other characters. The missions themselves are a variety of specific tasks that must be completed within Liberty City's streets and locales such as high-speed chases, bombings, bank heists, and drug deals. The completion of one mission will typically open up more missions, either from the same employer or from another contact met during the previous missions. In this way, *GTA IV*'s story spreads organically across Liberty City as Niko and the player find their feet in the new city and meet more people.

In addition to grounding Niko in his new world, the early missions work to contextualise the player's enactment of Niko, too, by demonstrating what actions are afforded and constrained by Niko's body, how Liberty City will react to these actions, what kind of person Niko is, and, ultimately, how Niko is able to act and be enacted within Liberty City. Both Niko and the player come to terms with Liberty City in their own ways

simultaneously. As Niko comes to terms with his new home and his new life, the player learns Liberty City's streets, the locations of secret items, the fastest routes, and the stealthiest back-alleys to lose the cops.

For the first hours of *GTA IV*'s story, however, the player and Niko only know Roman, and the opening missions are spent working for Roman's cab company, learning the layout of the city, understanding Niko's place in this new world, and making new contacts. These early hours cement Niko's disillusionment as he realises America is little different from the world he left behind and that, for many, the American Dream is quite literally a dream. The America depicted through Liberty City and experienced by the player through Niko is one of deluded characters, declining businesses, and vicious satire:

Filtered through the world-weary eyes of Eastern Bloc immigrant Niko Bellic, the American Dream is all strung-out, sapped dry from the coke-fuelled megalomania of the '80s, paying in full for the arrogance of its '90s empire-building [...] It's unforgiving stuff—an evisceration of America's insularity, its gluttony, its petty suburban miseries, its lethargy and artificiality. (*Edge*, "*Grand Theft Auto IV* Review" 1)

Such a cynical theme is well represented in film through movies such as *Scarface* (De Palma 1983) or *The Godfather: Part II* (Coppola 1974), but in a videogame such as *GTA IV*, the theme is not just presented in the narrative but embedded in the fictional world itself. Every billboard, line of dialogue, and radio ad drips with satire;¹¹ construction sites are never completed; the funfair at Firefly Island is closed down and abandoned; hobos sleep in the subway tunnels beneath Star Junction; and nigh every character Niko meets through his story is in denial about their own waning significance to Liberty City. The player does not just observe *GTA IV*'s themes but discovers them through their experience and control of Niko.

Liberty City's coherency and cohesiveness as a singular, consistent fictional world within which the player-character "lives" is central to *GTA IV*'s aesthetic. Through Niko, the player is not intended to feel significant or "central" to the world of *GTA IV*, but merely as

¹¹ Such as the "Richard Bastion Show" on conservative talkback radio station WKTT, with lines such as "What we've been given from our forefathers is the freedom from thought. That is the real freedom: knowing you are always right." and "Every minority in this country has its own agenda. You know what my agenda is? America!"

just another citizen existing and living within Liberty City. In addition to its vast size, Liberty City's density as a city resonates through the game's minute attention to detail and the complex interactions of its various systems. All streets have names; radio stations play ads for companies and websites that exist within the world; planes flying through the sky actually land at the city's airports; pedestrians will dial 911 to report crimes or traffic accidents. While many videogame fictional worlds are purely reactionary (in the sense that they are passive until the player-character acts and then they respond), Liberty City's systems give a sense of activity to the player independent of the player-character's actions. If the player-character just stands on the sidewalk, they will observe the world continue to progress around them.

Further emphasising Liberty City as independent of the player-character's actions or inactions is *GTA IV's* treatment of time, which constantly progresses at a rate of one virtual minute for every two seconds in the actual world, so that every forty-eight minutes of play is a complete twenty-four hour cycle of day and night. When Niko runs out of health he does not "die" and return to a previously saved state, but is transported to the nearest hospital, several in-game hours into the future. Likewise, when the player-character saves the game's progress by navigating Niko to one of his apartments and sleeping in his bed, six in-game hours pass. Just like New York, Liberty City slows down for nobody. Having to sleep in an apartment to save or load the game also has the effect of making different areas of Liberty City feel more homely to the player-character as some routes and suburbs will inevitably become more well-trodden than others. Combined, these myriad details give Liberty City the credence of not a videogame level but a living, breathing fictional world by making it clear to the player that Niko is not the central producer of action within the world, but just another actor among many others. Videogame critic Tom Bissell describes Liberty City's pull in detail, claiming that

I have never before felt more forcefully transported into a gameworld than while running across Liberty City's Middle Park in orange-sherbet dusk, taking a right turn onto the Algonquin Bridge and seeing the jewelled ocean glistening in the hard light of high afternoon, or stepping out of a Hove Beach tenement into damp phantasms of morning fog. (Bissell 169-70)

As the player completes more missions and becomes more “at home” with Liberty City, so too do they learn more about Niko and why he truly came to America—not just for redemption but also revenge. He is searching for someone he believes betrayed his squad during the Balkan Wars and is responsible for the deaths of Niko’s friends. It becomes clear over the opening act of *GTA IV*’s story, too, that there is more to Niko’s past than war. He was a people smuggler, possibly responsible himself for many deaths when a ship sank in the Mediterranean Sea. It is clear to characters around him that Niko’s deluded thirst for revenge is causing him to spiral tragically into a new life of crime despite the constant promises he makes to both himself and Roman that things are going to change for the better once he gets his revenge. Many times, Roman tries to talk Niko out of his quest, asking him if he really thinks he will feel better once he locates and kills the man. “Soon we will find out,” Niko replies without hesitation. Niko’s denial is clear to the player, too, but simply by playing *GTA IV* in the way Liberty City’s imperatives as embodied by Niko suggest, the player becomes implicated in Niko’s tragic descent. The player is pulled along by Niko’s obsession as much as they are guiding it.

Taking Control: Finding Your Feet in Liberty City

The player navigates Niko through Liberty City by performing a variety of physical actions through inputs on the controller (or the keyboard and mouse on PC). Typical athletic tasks such as walking, running, and climbing up on ledges can be performed; and the objects and people of Liberty City can be interacted with in a variety of ways such as buying hotdogs from street vendors or fast food joints to restore health, hailing taxis, shooting people, aggravating police, crouching behind walls or cars as cover during a shootout, and of course the titular activity of stealing vehicles. While in a vehicle, the player’s input via the controller shifts to reflect that the player is controlling Niko who is controlling the vehicle. On both Microsoft’s 360 and Sony’s Playstation 3 consoles, the player moves Niko by pushing forward on the left analogue stick, but to move a car forward, the right shoulder button on the top of the controller, must be held in. This change in input reflects that the player is not simply moving the car forward, but pushing Niko’s foot down on the accelerator. While in a vehicle, the player as Niko can perform a range of different actions not available on foot such as accelerating, reversing, changing the radio station, shooting sidearms out a window,

or running over pedestrians. The player's perception of Liberty City changes when in a vehicle, too. On foot, the player is more likely to notice minute details of the city's streets—the individual pedestrians going about their daily lives, the evangelical buskers preaching on the street-corners, the ads on the side of bus stops. In a vehicle, though, the player moves more quickly. The details fade away and are replaced with the social and economic gradients between suburbs and the flow of streets and highways. Further, while in a vehicle, diegetic music plays through the vehicle's radio, and this silences many of the city's sounds external to the vehicle. The different modes of navigation available to the player through Niko complement each other and build a multilayered understanding of Liberty City's space for the player.¹²

How the player controls Niko communicates to the player how Niko fits within the world of Liberty City. The actions afforded by the player-character are predominately physical and violent ones, and this suggests a specific style of play within a specific set of imperatives. This leads the player to more probably cause violent acts and break the laws of Liberty City and this, in turn, suggests a certain "type" of Niko for the player to enact. The player does not just enact Niko as a criminal because that is how the narrative suggests he "should" be enacted, but because the world's imperatives as embodied by Niko make it very difficult to play *GTA IV* and *not* perform criminal behaviour. Adrian Forest, making observations from his own attempt to play *GTA IV* with the self-imposed rule of not breaking any road rules, notes that "[a]ttempting to obey traffic rules almost immediately reveals that driving safely was never something the player was intended to do".

Unlike most playable characters who instantly break into a run, Niko strolls at the same pace as the other citizens around him, even when the analogue stick is pushed as far forward as it goes. In order to make him jog, another button must be held down, while to sprint the button must be tapped repeatedly. Speaking of *Red Dead Redemption* (Rockstar San Diego 2010)—a different Rockstar game that uses a similar input scheme—Juster notes

¹² This understanding is potentially layered even more for the player through *GTA IV*'s episodic expansions "The Lost and the Damned" (Rockstar North 2009) and "The Ballad of Gay Tony" (Rockstar North 2009). Each episode presents a different narrative driven by a different playable character in the same consistent Liberty City at a time parallel to Niko's story. The three narrative arcs, while each telling an independent story, intersect and overlap at various times to give new perspectives and insights on the others. In each episode, the player has a different, subjective experience of the same, consistent Liberty City by entering different player-character hybrids that are afforded and constrained by Liberty City in different ways. With each playable character the player understands both Liberty City and *GTA IV* differently.

that “[t]hese extra requirements suggest that moving quickly is the exceptional way of traveling, and the game world’s concept of ‘normal’ speed is relatively slow” (“Slow Riding”). “Normal” for Niko is “normal” for all the citizens of Liberty City, even if he is escaping from the cops after a violent shootout, and extra energy is required from both Niko and the player in order to move faster. Further, Niko’s slow movement also makes the theft of vehicles preferable for the player as to get anywhere in the city of foot would take a considerable time. *GTA IV* thus communicates Niko’s context within his world as just another citizen of Liberty City to the player *kinaesthetically* through the player’s physical control of Niko’s body through the controller.

The player controls Niko from a third-person, over the shoulder perspective that allows the player to observe Niko act and exist within and as part of Liberty City even while they enact him. For Laurie Taylor, the third-person perspective gives the player an embodied representation of the fictional world as both a

physical relationship of the character to the space and objects around the character and a contextualized presence in the game space so that the player can experience the space through the [playable character] as other than simply a geometric construction. (22)

The player can rotate the camera around Niko (or the vehicle he is occupying) with the right analogue stick on the controller (or mouse on PC), allowing the player to see things Niko may not be able to. Taylor argues that the strength of the third-person perspective for the player’s engagement is not simply seeing more but “seeing within a context” (29). In *GTA IV*, the third-person perspective contextualises Niko within Liberty city; the player enacts Niko and also observes Niko act within Liberty City. The third-person perspective in *GTA IV* expresses literally the distance between the playable character and the player as distinct actors coupled together, and it allows the player-character hybrid to achieve feats that neither the player nor Niko alone could, such as being able to see enemies around corners while Niko is safely hidden in cover.

Through the player’s simultaneous control of Niko’s body and the virtual camera with which they view it, the player is consciously aware that they are not in Liberty City themselves, but become immersed in Liberty City through acting and enacting Niko as they believe Niko would act. Bissell explains that for him, “Niko’s real pathos derives not from the

gimcrack story but how he looks and moves” (168), and goes further to say that “the times I identified most with Niko were not during the game’s frequent cut scenes [...] but rather when I watched him move through the world of Liberty City and I projected onto him my own guesses as to what he was thinking and feeling” (16). This is not to say Bissell thought he could read Niko’s mind, but that he decided what *his version* of Niko was thinking and acted as Niko accordingly. In this case, Bissell was not behaving in *GTA IV* how he himself would act or how Niko himself would act, but how Bissell’s instance of Niko—a Bissell-Niko hybrid—acts. This hybrid is constructed both by Bissell as a player (deciding how Niko should act) and Niko as a fictional being that embodies affordances and constraints (suggesting to Bissell how Niko should and can be enacted). That Bissell chooses to enact Niko based on how he interprets the game suggests Niko should act highlights the cybernetic loop between player and character; it shows that the shape of the player-character hybrid is initiated by neither player nor character but in the relationship between them. Together, synecdochically, the player-character is afforded new possibilities and actions that neither Niko nor the player could perform alone, determined as much by what Niko is capable of doing as by who he is.

The Everyday Life of Niko Bellic: Embracing the Contradictions of Emergent Play

GTA IV has loftier narrative ambitions than previous games in the franchise, but it is a narrative that cannot be considered in isolation from the emergent play that the open world Liberty City affords. The Grand Theft Auto franchise is successful not primarily for the criminal stories it tells but for letting the player break the laws of the fictional world their own way by experimenting with the game’s systems—namely, causing chaos and violence to see how the world responds. Rather, the Grand Theft Auto games present their playable characters as criminals in order to justify this chaotic, violent play style to the player¹³. The player has few qualms breaking the law in Liberty City not because they have no issue with breaking laws, but because they understand that Niko would have no qualms breaking the law.

¹³ For a thorough account of the history of the Grand Theft Auto franchise see the chapter “The Grooviest Era of Crime” in Tristan Donovan’s *Replay* (2010).

However, some critics think the two styles of play—that prescribed during the missions and that possible outside of missions—do not sit together so harmoniously. Some claim there is a *ludonarrative dissonance*¹⁴ where the player must play Niko in a way that contradicts the Niko presented in the narrative’s cut scenes. Trent Polack highlights this dissonance succinctly in a single anecdote:

There’s a slight tinge of contradiction when cut scene Niko attempts to convince other in-world characters that he wants nothing more out of his new life in America than to live peacefully after in-game Niko just ran over an entire city block of hipsters outside of a coffee shop. (Polack)

What such criticisms highlight is that the player-character hybrid can be disrupted if the player’s understanding of the playable character as a fictional being conflicts with how the playable character embodies the fictional world’s imperatives. While the player should be able to actively believe they are the player-character hybrid, a dissonance between the playable character’s being and bodily capabilities can render the playable character’s mediation over the player jarringly visible. When this happens, the relationship between the player and the playable character ceases to be synecdochic and instead becomes metonymic. Sobchack notes that when humans interact with technological objects (such as her own prosthetic leg) it is always possible that the object will fail to work as intended or hoped. As such, Sobchack notes that

my experience—and view—of my leg (indeed, of the rest of my body) is not only *dynamic* and *situated* but also *ambiguous* and *graded*. That is, whether and to what degree I live (and describe) my prosthetic metaphorically, metonymically, or synecdochically is dependent on my engagements with others [...] with my environment [...] with my mood. (215, original emphasis)

The player-character hybrid is similarly dynamic, situated, ambiguous, and graded. As agency flows cybernetically between player and playable character the player’s relationship with the character shifts, and the shape of the player-character hybrid is altered. In *GTA IV*,

¹⁴ This term was popularised by videogame developer and critic Clint Hocking in his critique of *Bioshock* (2K Boston 2007) to discuss what he saw as a “powerful dissonance between what it is about as a game and what it is about as a story [...] The leveraging of the game’s narrative structure against its ludic structure all but destroys the player’s ability to feel connected to either, forcing the player to either abandon the game in protest [...] or simply accept that the game cannot be enjoyed as both a game and a story, and to then finish it for the mere sake of finishing it” (Hocking).

agency sits predominately with Niko during the cut scenes (where the player has no say over what Niko says or does) and then predominately with the player during play (where the player has some say over what Niko does within the imperatives of the world). The player-character hybrid is, by design, unstable and fragile, and is able to be disrupted by either the player or the playable character.

However, Leigh Alexander argues that this ludonarrative dissonance is not a case of poor design but simply a videogame being a videogame:

Being able to create that dissonance in games is actually important to our sense of power as a player; it helps us control the dispensary rate of the story and its intensity. It lets us know we're the leaders of an interactive narrative when we can stop doing what the game wants and just do something dumb. That's what makes games fun. (Alexander)

Just as the viewer of *Star Wars* (Lucas 1977) must accept that stormtroopers have impossibly bad aim in order to enjoy the film's narrative, the player of a videogame must accept the dissonance between what they can do and what the narrative expects them to do in order to enjoy their engagement with the videogame through the player-character hybrid. Those that find an irreconcilable dissonance between Niko's portrayal in cut scenes and their own emergent actions make the same mistake as Juul in presuming that a coherent fictional world must be "realistic" and not simply "possible". While it is not realistic that Niko would commit the heinous crimes that the player is able to act out during missions, it is coherent insofar as it is *possible to imagine* such a world—in the same way it is possible to imagine a world where eating hotdogs is a remedy for gunshot wounds. This is not to say that players and critics such as Polack are playing *GTA IV* incorrectly, but that their interpretation of Liberty City as a realistic world as opposed to a coherent yet fictional one makes the dissonance irreconcilable.

Many players will spend much of their time in *GTA IV* causing vast amounts of chaos with little consideration of what it means for Niko or his story. However, *GTA IV*'s attempts to encompass all the player-character's contradictory actions as ideally *incorporated into* Niko's fictional, everyday existence within Liberty City. "[T]he contradiction is in Niko himself: a man troubled by his own bleak world-view, traumatized by his own experience of the Balkan conflict" (*Edge*, "*Grand Theft Auto IV* Review" 1). The fragile, fluctuating,

contradictory, volatile nature of the player-character hybrid is explained through Niko's everyday existence as a deluded, possibly sociopathic citizen of Liberty City who some days works towards finding the man he wishes to kill, some days sits at home and watches TV, and some days blows up buses with a rocket launcher.

GTA IV attempts to blur the line between what is story and what is emergence through Niko's conflicted, contradictory everyday existence. Fraser Allison notes that the missions "are set within the context of a normal life". At certain points during the game, Niko receives a phone call that will instantly begin a mission, rather than leaving it up to the player to make their way to the mission's starting location whenever they please. Other missions have long-term objectives that require the player to wait several in-game days between completing one part and commencing the next. While listening to Weasel News on the radio (a disturbingly accurate parody of Fox News) the player will often recognise reports of events that were their own doing on previous missions. Sometimes, other characters may phone Niko to ask for a lift or to hang out on small side quests where the dialogue between the characters fleshes out their personalities and lives in Liberty City. Occasionally, Niko receives these phone calls at inconvenient times during missions, such as when Roman calls Niko to come to a strip joint while Niko is in the process of stealing a helicopter. Niko responds, "I don't know if you can hear it, Roman, but I am in a helicopter!" Moments later, while still flying the helicopter, Niko receives a photo message from Roman on his phone (that the player must open and navigate to manually while also controlling the helicopter) of a stripper's breasts. While such events are scripted, they add a texture of persistence and continuity to Liberty City so that, ideally, the player does not experience *GTA IV* as two separate beasts (one the story, one a playground) but as a singular, coherent, cohesive city where the missions and the emergent play combine so Liberty City feels like a sprawling metropolis within which Niko is just a single man living out an (often illegal, often absurd) life. *GTA IV* does not so much ignore the player's emergent play and its volatile effect on the player-character hybrid as subsume it into Niko's torn existence within the ever-progressing, never-stopping Liberty City.

Thematically, the likelihood of the player causing chaos through Niko between missions fits with *GTA IV*'s portrayal of Niko as an ultimately flawed and tragic character. He

never does find redemption and by the time he possibly gets his revenge,¹⁵ he becomes aware that he is already too deeply rooted in his behaviour to ever change. As Niko himself concedes later in the game, “My hands haven’t been clean for a long time. Being here in Liberty City is just making them dirtier.” This reaches a peak when another decision the player makes towards the end of the game’s narrative ultimately leads to the death of someone Niko loves. If the player chooses to work with a man Niko does not trust in return for a large sum of money, Roman later ends up dead. If Niko refuses to work for the man and instead tracks him down and kills him, Niko’s love interest, Kate McReary, later ends up dead. The player’s choice is ultimately unable to prevent a tragic conclusion to Niko’s story and, further, the player’s choice determines *which* tragic conclusion ends Niko’s story. Through this one, ultimately insignificant choice the player not only becomes aware of the tragic inevitability of Niko’s situation but also complicit in it. By playing *GTA IV* within the affordances and constraints of Liberty City as embodied by Niko—by stealing cars, blowing up buses, and causing chaos while Niko insists to those around him he wishes to live a peaceful life—the player fortifies *GTA IV*’s portrayal of Niko as a conflicted, tragic character trapped in an inevitable decline. As Niko ironically preaches to one character, Playboy X, before assassinating him: “You didn’t change the game, the game changed you.”

For Juul, through his lens of videogames as existing within a fundamental framework of “gameness”, a tragic videogame is practically inconceivable:

It is hard to create a tragic video game—tragedies are about events beyond our control that are then transformed into something more meaningful through the tragedy, but games are mostly about having power and overcoming challenges. A bad game is one in which the player dies without being able to prevent it. (161)

This quote, in light of the above reading of *GTA IV*, exposes how Juul and the many other theorists and critics that privilege the player’s intentions over the videogame are unable to account for the production of textual meaning that emerges from the networks of mediating relationships between player and videogame. The player never has the ability to save Niko, to walk away from the life of crime, but enacts him how the game wanted him to be enacted, even when engaging freely and contrarily with Liberty City through emergent

¹⁵ The player makes the ultimate decision whether to pull the trigger and kill the man Niko has been hunting the whole game based on whether or not the player believes their instance of Niko would do it.

play. As such, a traditional analysis of a videogame that puts the player squarely in the middle of the production of meaning fails to account for how meaning is produced in *GTA IV* through the player's mediation by Niko. But through the player-character hybrid, by tracing the back-and-forth flow of agency between the player and Niko, the player's role in Niko's decline as both witness and instigator can be examined. The player decides how Niko will act, but such a decision is constantly mediated by how Niko *can* act. As Latour would say, the subject constructs the object and the object constructs the subject.

Conclusion

This thesis has demonstrated what is gained by a more nuanced examination of the relationship between player and playable character. It renders the production of textual meaning within the act of videogame play traceable by accounting for not just how the player “uses” the playable character to interact with the videogame but how players and playable characters combine in unique assemblages where each has an active role in the translation and creation of the other.

Chapter One firstly showed how the player comprehends the videogame as a fictional world represented audiovisually and embedded with imperatives that afford and constrain the player’s behaviour. Rather than a simple, passive “mask” that the player puts on to “enter” this fictional world, this chapter demonstrated that the playable character is a distinct, different actor from the player, and they relate through not how they are the same but how they are different. Finally, Chapter One showed how the misconception of the playable character as a passive, intermediary mask has led to a conflation of player and playable character as highlighted in the common use of the second-persona address in videogame discourses and scholarship.

Chapter Two subsequently opened up and explored the actors and relationships hidden by this conflation by understanding the event of videogame play as cybernetically constructed through a network of human and nonhuman, organic and technological, actual and fictional, playful actors. This allowed a more nuanced understanding of the pleasure of videogame play as not simply the player’s mastery over the videogame but the player’s participation *with* the videogame. Within this, the relationship between player and playable character was seen as a “cybernetic subsystem” (Giddings and Kennedy 23) where both player and playable character become a synecdochic, ensemblic actor of which each makes a unique, partial contribution but which is irreducible to neither. The player and playable character form a player-character hybrid, and the player engages with the videogame not by believing they are the playable character but believing they are the hybrid—the player’s own unique instance of the playable character. Building upon this, Chapter Two showed that the player-character hybrid is formed empathetically. The player does not enact the

playable character as they themselves would act, but as they understand that playable character would act.

When analysing a videogame textually, it is important that the videogame scholar avoids what Atkins and Kryzwinska call “the maelstrom of imagination of potential” (2) and focus on how the videogame is actually played. As such, when conducting videogame criticism both the videogame’s configuration of the player and the player’s configuration of the videogame must be considered in tandem if the videogame’s production of meaning is to be examined. Chapter Three demonstrated this through a close analysis of *Grand Theft Auto IV*. Niko Bellic’s fictional existence as outlined by the game’s narrative communicates his identity as an outsider in Liberty City to the player as well as his role as a violent denizen. Beyond the narrative, the player understands Niko’s place in Liberty City through their control of him and his embodiment of the imperatives of Liberty City, being able to commit a vast array of criminal activities but only a handful of legal ones. The player is motivated to play emergently between missions in a way that causes massive amounts of chaos in Liberty City, which is contrasted and contextualised by the everyday mundanity of Liberty City. This analysis highlighted the volatile, messy, contradicting, and dynamic nature of the player-character hybrid as it is actually deployed in videogame texts, where either the player’s or playable character’s actions can easily disrupt it. But rather than render the player-character hybrid unusable, it is this volatility that holds the hybrid together. By accounting for the contradicting nature of the relationship between the player and Niko, this chapter was ultimately able to read *Grand Theft Auto IV* as a tragic videogame where both Niko and the player are complicit in the downward spiral Niko is trapped in.

An understanding of videogame play that privileges the player’s intentions as the producer of meaning would not be able to make such a reading. The videogame criticism as called for by Chapter One and Chapter Two and deployed in Chapter Three accounts not only for the pleasure of exerting agency over the videogame but also that of a loss of agency, a pleasure of being acted upon. Videogame play is an *interrelation* of agencies, and within this is the player’s involvement with the playable character—of both configuring and being configured by the playable character. This thesis should not be seen as a prescriptive solution to account for playable characters critically across all videogame texts as such a prescription would disavow the specific, actual, unique relationships it insists must be

traced. Instead, this thesis should be read as a step towards the hybrid aesthetics of videogames as called for by Wilson (“Odyssey Renewed” 8). To observe and trace the hybrid formed between player and playable character—a unique blend of the player’s intentions and the playable character’s bodily existence—is to allow a close, critical analysis of individual videogame texts and to comprehend how meaning is produced between player and videogame.

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