All Your Choice Are Belong To Us:

An Exploration of Neoliberal Capitalism, Digital Games, and Narrative Choice

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Introduction

As digital computing technologies advance, video games are increasingly hailed as the new platform for media. Novels, film, and television have the ability to portray space and present narrative, but only video games – in the majority of cases – provide the opportunity to move through and explore space, and engage in action that defines the narrative. Taking advantage of the flexibility and non-linearity of new media technologies, video games are now rivaling older media in both potential and popularity (Aarseth, 1997; Cover, 2004; Gee 2003; Murray, 1997). According to the Entertainment Software Association, as of 2011, the Canadian video game industry has grown 11% in the past two years and "59% of Canadians are gamers" (the ESA classifies a 'gamer' as "a person who has played computer or video games in the past four weeks") (ESA, 2011, p. 13). In the U.S., 49% of households have at least one dedicated gaming console. People are spending less time reading books, going to the movies, and watching television in favour of playing video games (Cover, 2004; ESA, 2012). Video games have become an innovative vehicle for narrative, telling the stories that resonate with players and that reflect and critique contemporary culture (Galloway, 2006; Murray, 1997).

Video games not only require action, but as Galloway (2006) argues, they *are* action. Until the software is traversed by the user, the game does not exist. It exists only as the user plays, and is based upon materializing actions that the user takes. As a deeply enacted medium, video games are more immersive and can have a greater impact on the audience/player than other media. This enacted, immersive aspect of digital games makes them culturally significant, as they affect and are affected by the society within which they are created and experienced.

Games arise within and as a part of society, reflecting and (re)producing the culture's desires, ideologies, and underlying systems. Culture is inextricably entangled with games, to the point that play often creates cultural meaning and societal understanding. (Cover, 2004; Galloway, 2006; Huizinga, 1955; Salen & Zimmerman, 2005).

Galloway (2006) diminishes the boundaries between video games and serious everyday life when he asserts that "one may approach video games today as a type of beautifully undisturbed processing of contemporary life" (p. 86). However, since games are approached as playful renderings of life, they are able to manifest and enact systems and structures in society in a seemingly innocuous manner; they "render social realities into playable form" (Galloway, 2006, p. 17). Digital games are processes of signification that offer interpretations of life in a way that older media cannot, modeling the human perspective of reality as a nebulous space with diverging outcomes, multiple possibilities, and the potential for free will (Folkerts, 2010; Murray, 1997). These potentialities are embedded in the grammar of games, which have the "ability to capture experience as systems of interrelated actions" (Murray, 1997, p. 274) in a vibrant multi-linear fashion. Through their manifestation of cultural systems, video games offer interactive narrative choices that reflect, reinforce, and impact present structures in society.

Narrative and Interactivity

Narratives, regardless of the medium, offer interpretations of human existence that help people to express and understand the world. Stories create meaning and coherence for a culture (Murray, 1997; Neitzel, 2005). While there has been debate as to whether games should be studied from a narrative perspective or a play perspective (narratology vs. ludology), this paper takes the well-established position that both the narrative and the gameplay are essential elements of video games and contribute to the pleasure of the medium (Aarseth, 1997; Ang,

2006; Cassidy, 2011; Neitzel, 2005; Noon & Dyer-Witheford, 2010). There is a great deal of overlap between games and narratives, and most games have some form of narrative to motivate play. Indeed, Folkerts (2010) asserts that "without narrativity there is no game" (p. 107). Likewise, without play, there is no game. The narrative and the gameplay influence one another; changes in the narrative will often result in changes in the rules for play, and vice versa.

Role-playing games (RPGs) are a genre of video games with a focus on storytelling; they immerse the player in a fictional world from the perspective of a character in a narrative. When the player assumes the role of the character, they are able to interact with the game world, altering it through their actions. These digital games have narrative potential that expands the traditional understanding of narrative, beyond the scope of linearity and beyond the expected passive-reader level of engagement (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009). Each time a player plays an RPG, the course of events changes due to the player's actions within the game, yet each time the player traverses the game a narrative forms during that play session. Thus, the player is able to take on an active role and make choices from a multitude of options and potential actions, yet emerges with a complete narrative at the completion of one playthrough of the game (Cassidy, 2011; Murray, 1997). This type of branching narrative, that requires input from the user, has been given many names including: 'hypertext', 'cybertext', 'ergodic literature', 'multi-linear narrative', and 'nonlinear text' (Aarseth, 1997). RPGs and other nonlinear texts feature interactivity, connote an ideal of participatory democracy, and require "nontrivial effort" (Aarseth, 1997, p. 1) in order to navigate the text (Cassidy, 2011; Cover, 2004). Nonlinear narratives are not new phenomena, but video games are uniquely suited to express them (Aarseth, 1997; Murray, 1997; Raynauld, 2005).

This paper will distinguish between the ‘master narrative’ and the ‘player’s narrative’. The master narrative is the main story arch, which the player is asked to follow and is often given little control over. The player’s narrative involves subquests and side missions that alter the player’s experience but generally do not affect the master narrative in a significant manner. The intersection of the master narrative in the player’s narrative results in the potential for each player to produce a different narrative through play.

A central component to video games as a medium is their interactivity, which is the aspect that insists upon and allows the action of the user. The player and the computer/game are both required to perform in tandem, reacting to one another in order for the game to be experienced. In this context, interaction does not mean the idea that the reader of a text brings their own interpretations to the text, but rather that the text requires action to be experienced. This interactivity is vital to the medium of digital games, and to the types of stories that are told (Aarseth, 1997; Apperley, 2006; Galloway, 2006). Much of the appeal of these narratives stems from the notion that the player can effect changes in the game world, and in the story. The pleasure of interactivity is the player’s pleasure in having a perception of agency; it is important not only that players *can* take action, but that their actions are *meaningful* within the digital environment (Cover, 2004; Murray, 1997). Salen and Zimmerman (2005) discuss when game actions becoming meaningful, stating that the player’s actions must be both ‘discernible’ and ‘integrated’. Essentially, the player's actions must have noticeable results, and be coherent with the rest of the game. Consequences are essential for both gameplay and narrative, increasing the player’s immersion, belief in the game world, and investment in the narrative. Digital games satisfy the long-held human desire to experience something beyond reality and to live in a world

of fantasy, by permitting new levels of immersion and participation than traditional narrative forms (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Lukacs, Wright, & Embrick, 2010; Murray, 1997).

With the growing prevalence, yet relative novelty, of video games, the structures within which their narrative choices operate must be assessed to understand the ways that they position their players. Particularly, as games reflect dominant cultural structures, players interact with underlying frameworks that reinforce, respond to, and occasionally challenge the neoliberal systems that currently exist within society.

Empire

> *To a greater degree than perhaps any previous media other than the book, virtual games are a direct offshoot of their society's main technology of production. From their origins in nuclear-age simulations, games have sprung from the machine system central to postwar capital's power and profit – the computer. (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009, pp. xviii-xix)*

An exploration of the ways in which narrative and choice in video games (specifically, RPGs) operate as a discourse deeply entrenched in current cultural structures requires an understanding of the present condition of neoliberal capitalism. Hardt and Negri (2000) characterize the current state of neoliberal capitalism as 'Empire', under whose logic society functions. Empire refers to the state of the world wherein almost every aspect of human existence is in some way impacted or controlled by contemporary relations of capital, meaning that global capitalism has achieved governance. Individuals and society as a whole are subjected to Marx's (1967) "real subsumption" by capital, as all facets of life are made profitable for capital, are subordinated to capital, and are exploited by capital (Dyer-Witheford, 1999; Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Hardt & Negri, 2000; Marx, 1967). Wark (2007) summarizes this

dynamic as it exists within leisure time by stating simply: “Play is no longer a counter to work. Play becomes work; work becomes play” (para. 16). Social life and leisure are not separate from the logic of capital in Empire.

Empire inscribes its authority through the construction of norms, self-legitimating discourse, and relations of capitalist production that reinforce the supremacy of commodities and capital. Empire harnesses the life and potential of its subjects into a form of power that Foucault (2007) and Hardt and Negri (2000) refer to as biopower. Biopower “regulates social life from its interior, following it, interpreting it, absorbing it, and rearticulating it” (Hardt & Negri, 2000, pp. 23-24), becoming profoundly ingrained in the functioning of society to the point where people reinscribe it in the course of their daily lives. Social life is regulated and commoditized through the relations of capital, ultimately becoming productive for capital.

The rhythms of work are interspersed throughout both paid and unpaid time, and the worker of Empire is separated from production in an economy that focuses on immaterial labour (labour that creates immaterial goods such as knowledge, or provides services). Even labourers in positions associated with physical products are affected by Empire, as what they are selling becomes their living labour power and time, not the product itself; these workers, too, are constructed as an immaterial labour force under contemporary capitalism. The factory ceases to have boundaries, and people are reduced to commodities (Dyer-Witheford, 1999; Negri, 1989).

As neoliberal capitalism expands to encompass all aspects of life, Hardt and Negri (2000) emphasize the equal expansion of the potential for resistance that grows alongside relations of capital. As Empire increasingly subsumes leisure, unpaid, and social activities, it allows each additional conquest to become yet another site where its authority can be challenged. The globalization of capital’s control makes any single node of resistance able to have a stronger

impact, as the resistance can make use of the same global networks. Resistance and struggle are inextricably tied to Empire, and as Empire attempts to exert its control, it increases the potential for lines of flight and escape from its logic and emphasis on profit. As Empire seeks to construct flexible subjects with knowledge of technology, these subjects are able to use their autonomy and skills in a variety of subversive ways. Due to this tension between the biopower of Empire, and the autonomous social energies known as the biopolitical production of the subjects, Empire is ruptured by constant cycles of struggle (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Dyer-Witheford, 1999; Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Gill & Pratt, 2008; Hardt & Negri, 2000).

Technology and machines are created for social purposes, yet they embody the contradictory dualisms of Empire through their use. Play, too, is both an activity with a social purpose that creates order and reinforces certain ideologies, and one that is a deviation from order and control. Transgression is a large component of play, and can be used to formulate critiques of society's norms. Video games are a space of play that illuminate the irreconcilable cycles at work in Empire, as they reinscribe and resist relations of capital (Cover, 2004; Dyer-Witheford, 1999; Galloway, 2006; Langman & Lukacs, 2010; Lukacs, Wright, & Embrick, 2010). Complex systems involving video games, algorithms, and new machinic subjectivities inevitably evolve and produce unpredictable outcomes. Identity formation and the locus of culture have shifted from labour to entertainment fantasies in the neoliberal capitalist age. However, as Empire seeks to subsume and commodify existence, these spaces are colonized by capital and standardized for the market (Aarseth, 1997; Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Henricks, 2006; Langman & Lukacs, 2010; Lukacs, Wright, & Embrick, 2010). Entertainment, including video games, has become "another source of alienation where people buy their own pleasures, prepackaged for privatized consumption" (Langman & Lukacs, 2010, p. 63). Video

games are commodified products that reassert the discourse of Empire, and also fantasies that provide opportunities for transgression and nodes of resistance.

Video games are not only reflective of Empire, but they are expressions of Empire. The grammar of games embodies the systems of Empire in often subtle ways, as ideologies are embedded in the very logic and processes of the game. As paradigmatic products of Empire, video games present current relations of capital in an unabashed, un-self-conscious form and thus can be analyzed to shed light on the underlying structures of Empire (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2005; Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Galloway, 2006). As Empire subsumes life and play, the structures of capitalism and the structures of the game become one and the same. As Wark observes, "You are a gamer whether you like it or not, now that we all live in a gamespace that is everywhere and nowhere. ... You can go anywhere you want in gamespace but you can never leave it" (para. 1). The game is not a mere stand-in for the system, it *is* the system.

Gamers are positioned as empowered participants within the interactive space of video games, but this is an illusion that veils the forces of capital controlling the gamespace. Indeed, Dyer Witheford and de Peuter (2009) claim that video games are now hailed as producing the types of immaterial labourers with the knowledge and subject positions that capital requires of them. Empire creates and distributes media, including video games, in order to enhance its own development and biopower. The structures that exist in neoliberal capitalism also operate in the spaces of video games, which support, reflect, and respond to Empire (Dyer-Witheford, 1999; Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Negri, 1989). Choice or the illusion of choice in video games is an important site of both Empire and of potential resistance, particularly because the presence of cultural commentary and reflection in mainstream video games is often unintentional. The interactivity of this medium and the ability for the player to impact the story in significant ways

have the potential to influence the types of narratives that are told, and change the experience of the reader/player; therefore, it is crucial to assess the effects of narrative choice in video games in relation to the forces of modern capitalism.

Section 1: Society of Control

> *Video games are allegories for our contemporary life under the protocological network of continuous informatics control. In fact, the more emancipating games seem to be as a medium, substituting activity for passivity or a branching narrative for a linear one, the more they are in fact hiding the fundamental social transformation into informatics that has affected the globe during recent decades. (Galloway, 2006, p. 106)*

While Foucault (1977) traces the history of contemporary power relations from the society of punishment to the society of discipline, wherein people became self-managed subjects for fear of the authoritative gaze, Deleuze (1992) suggests that society has undergone another paradigm shift to become a society of control. The society of discipline relied upon social institutions, such as prisons, factories, schools, and hospitals, to impose a sense of constant observation and judgment. Consequently, people became self-disciplining under this panoptic gaze as they passed between enclosed institutionalized environments. According to Deleuze (1992), this era has given way to a society of control that is characterized by free-floating systems of control that are "continuous and without limit" (p. 6), and which have expanded to include social relations. Through the real subsumption, capital spreads and deepens its control and production of life, constructing a 'social factory'. Culture, school, work, and home become a single, multifaceted network that constitutes the social factory, within which people are free to move; however, due to the networked structure of the social factory, the subjects are never

finished with any one part but instead must submit to perpetual training, work in the home, and the commodification of culture (Deleuze, 1992; Dyer-Witheford, 1999; Hardt & Negri, 2000).

The society of control socializes subjects to be productive subjects of value, and exploitation is no longer temporally limited to the nine-to-five day or spatially confined to the factory. According to Deleuze (1992), "in a society of control, the corporation has replaced the factory" (p. 4). Corporations have wide reach, from data mining to advertising to influence on policy, and they are not a physical location like the factory, but a diffuse network. An illusion of freedom arises because subjects are not constrained to the factory, yet they are controlled to a greater extent as they are unable to escape the corporation in the same way that leaving the factory at the end of the day signaled an end of productivity (Dyer-Witheford, 1999).

Hardt and Negri (2000) conclude that power is now exerted by machines such as information systems and networks of communication. According to their research, a key component of this type of control is the flexibility and variability of these types of systems. Regardless of the subject's movement or choices from within the network, the system is capable of adapting to maintain supremacy. They declare that "interactive and cybernetic machines become a new prosthesis integrated into our bodies and minds themselves" (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p. 291). Computing technologies have ways of being that affect how people think, and how people are tutored to exist in the world. Through this "'wired' habitat" (Dyer-Witheford, 1999, p. 85), ideologies and the structures of Empire can be effectively downloaded into the minds of the people. Ironically, these machines are often cited as the source of a new wave of choice and participatory democracy. This rhetoric of liberation is misleading, as choice within these machines is limited within the preset boundaries of profitability and the logic of capital (Dyer-Witheford, 1999; Hardt & Negri, 2000).

Capital has come to foster a culture of restricted participation rather than one of repetitive routines, and video games embody this logic, becoming a form of control. The structure of narrative choice in RPGs thrusts players into the same system of restricted participation that they experience in their daily lives under Empire, and constructs an illusion of agency that ultimately increases their susceptibility to manipulation (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Galloway, 2006). Games suggest an apparently limitless range of potential stories and outcomes, glorifying the interactivity that they offer (Cassidy, 2011). Aarseth (1997) suggests that interactivity is a loaded term because it implies freedom and participation, while ideologically positioning the human interactor at the same level as the computer or console. This rhetorical move is exemplary of the discourse surrounding video game choice, because it reduces the agency of the subject while seeming to increase it.

Nevertheless, the interactivity and promises of agency are an important reason why many people play video games, particularly when the mechanic of narrative choice is used, as it is in RPGs. As players become involved in the course that the story takes, they engage in a process of reforming, re-ordering, and decision-making that appears to be a meaningful democratic restructuring of audience participation. Players feel as though they co-author the narrative, producing one linear tale at the end of their gaming session from the wide range of possibilities (Cassidy, 2011; Cover, 2004). The emotional impact of the narrative is heightened by how responsible the player feels for the outcome(s), because the player perceives the story as a personal, enacted experience. Jenkins (2005) refers to these as ‘memorable moments’, where the player truly feels in control. The more freedom and agency that the player feels they have, the more meaningful and satisfying the consequences of their plot choices become, even if their impact upon the narrative is actually quite minimal and the programmer/author maintains true

control. To this end, many games purposely ensure that the player's choices are 'discernible' in the narrative (Murray, 1997; Salen & Zimmerman, 2005).

For example, the fantasy RPG *The Witcher* (2007) places a heavy emphasis on the agency of the player and the nonlinearity of the plot, evidenced by a description on the game's website: "The game features an innovative, time delayed decision-consequence system, prodding players to make their decisions seriously and with thought" (CD Projekt RED, n.d., para. 6). The consequences of the player's previous choices are revealed after hours of gameplay in a small artistic montage while the main character, Geralt, explains the impact of the decision via a voiceover. The game highlights how the player's choice has affected the game world, assuring the player that their choices have been important. However, regardless of the choices made by the player, the story still progresses in roughly the same manner, with small alterations to the player's narrative that were a result of their decisions. Whether the player chooses to save the witch or kill her, engage in a romance with a sorceress or a medic, or side with the freedom fighting elves or the honor-bound knights, the game will end with the same twist ending every time. The deliberate exposition of the impact of the player's choices serves as a red herring, to distract players from the fact that they have very little true agency within the master narrative.

Furthermore, many games attempt to introduce narrative choice through dialogue options and actions that are either 'good' or 'evil'. *Fallout 3* (2008) does this through the 'karma' game mechanic, where players can earn either positive or negative karma, the *Mass Effect* (2007; 2010; 2012) series gives points for paragon or renegade actions, *Fable* (2004) has an alignment system where players have either a good or evil alignment, and *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (2003) (KotOR) rewards light side and dark side actions. This simplistic moral scale gives the player small choices along the course of the narrative, often allowing options for how their

character deals with non-player characters (NPCs) and side quests. By tethering moral choices to a scale and awarding points for certain actions, these games are ensuring that players know the impact of their choices – either it was good, or it was bad. However, this system is limiting, offering only two or three (often exaggerated) options. Although this allows the player to feel in control of the situation, it does not provide truly deep agency or meaningful choices.

In KotOR, for example, the player encounters a man with a bounty on his head. The player can choose to kill the man and collect the bounty, or give the man 200 credits so that he can pay off his debt. This choice has no lasting effect on the world of the game, as both choices cause the man to disappear from the game. Accumulating good or evil in these games generally causes NPCs to treat the player character differently, sometimes affects the player character's appearance, and will often influence which types of abilities the player can choose when they level up their character. In terms of the narrative, these choices are meant to provide a sense of control, without altering the master narrative in a significant way.

The system operates in the same way in both Empire and video games, providing people with the illusion of agency to satisfy the need for meaning, while the world is dominated by underlying, widespread mechanisms of control. The goal-oriented nature of video games requires players to be controlled to a certain extent, as only particular actions will allow them to achieve the objectives set by the game. Regardless of the open-endedness of a game and its narrative, the player will always be constrained by the parameters and programming of the game. Therefore, the participation of the player is molded by the game itself, training the player to interpret the game world in specific ways, and thus take certain actions (Apperley, 2006; Cassidy, 2011; Cover, 2004; Murray, 1997). Aarseth comments on this characteristic of adventure games, stating that "in most adventure game situations, the reader's activity is very predictable.

Certainly it is fair to say that it is being produced or directed by the text" (Aarseth, 1997, p. 106). Consequently, that which the player perceives as freedom is often a series of preordained plots. Even in game worlds that are praised for their open-ended sandbox nature, the player does not interact with the game on their own terms, as the game encourages only specific types of quests, plots, and character positions (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Henricks, 2010).

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim (2011) is one such sandbox game. The freedom of the player within the game world is emphasized on the back of the game cover:

> Skyrim reimagines and revolutionizes the open-world fantasy epic, bringing to life a complete virtual world open for you to explore any way you choose. The legendary freedom of choice, storytelling, and adventure of The Elder Scrolls is realized like never before. (Bethesda, 2011, para. 1)

Skyrim has an endless number of quests that the player can complete, as it is able to generate random new quests indefinitely. It has a master plot and several side plots, but the player is not obligated to finish any of these stories, and can roam around making their own player's narrative. As a fantasy game, *Skyrim* allows the player to embark on a very limited master narrative path. However, the player's narrative can differ widely, as the player can kill dragons and monsters, master skills such as blacksmithing, hire adventurers to aid in their quests, explore a magical medieval-style world, become involved in supernatural incidents (e.g.: werewolves, vampires, etc.), and rise through the ranks of political and guild hierarchies. This dimension of flexibility in the game allows each player to potentially experience a different narrative, giving them agency over the player's narrative, if not the master narrative. Although the player remains constrained by the world of the game, they are able to craft a unique sequence of events through play.

In *Skyrim*, the player's narrative differs with each playthrough, but even if the player ignores the main quests, a large part of the game is based on a dungeon-crawling monster-killing narrative that is difficult to avoid without specifically intending to do so. The resulting gameplay is remarkably similar, whether the player follows the main quest, the side quests, or simply wanders around exploring the world. These constraints on play define the game world and allow the player to engage in certain activities while preventing others. While the constraints can be an expression of the society of control, they are a necessary component to any game or system. Constraints allow developers to set in-game goals and to limit the player in ways that make the game enjoyable. A freeform game with no guiding purpose and an invincible player character does not create meaningful play. Likewise, narratives must be limited in order to be coherent. Game limitations and constraints can be positive forces that enhance the player experience, making games challenging and interesting. Constraints become an issue only when the extent of the restrictions and their forms of control become reflective of the systems of control that govern Empire.

Furthermore, *Skyrim* suffers from a lack of the 'discernible' choices that *The Witcher* emphasizes so heavily. In order to keep the world an open-ended sandbox, the player's actions and their narrative cannot significantly affect the game world. As a result, nothing in *Skyrim* ever seems to change, whether the player completes the main quest, becomes the leader of the thieves' guild, kills random people in the wilderness for no reason, or frees a demon god. These actions ought to have consequences for the world, but are impeded by the game's unwillingness to limit the player's 'freedom'. The player's narrative is altered, but the world of the game itself remains unchanged. *The Witcher* ensures that the player is fully aware of the outcomes of their choices and changes the game world accordingly, while *Skyrim* lacks a mechanism to explore the

consequences of the events in the player's narrative. Once more, the player is only given the illusion of agency, as none of their choices impact the game world in a noticeable way.

Many players have played *Skyrim* subversively, however. YouTube videos and internet articles abound with examples of players railing against the limited 'fantasy-world' narratives that the game offers. One player gathered up thousands of wheels of cheese, which can be found in many of the NPC homes throughout the game, and dropped them all off the top of a mountain (STuKKie86, 2011). This is an unintended use of game materials, and falls outside the realm of dark fantasy that the game attempts to construct. Another player created a modification for the game, which changes the dragons' heads to the cowboy-hat-wearing mug of wrestler Macho Man Randy Savage and alters the dragons' roaring sound effect to the voice of the wrestler yelling "yeah!" (TheBajanCanadian, 2012). This mod brings in elements that are completely beyond the scope of the game world, and transgresses the serious and threatening qualities that the dragons were designed to exude.

Another example of the player's resistance of the logic of the game is when gamers discovered that they could use the game's mechanics against it in order to steal items in front of NPCs without the usual repercussions. This is possible by picking up a large pot and tipping it over an NPC's head. By obscuring the NPC's vision in this way, the gamers could take items from homes and stores, and the NPC would stand there unaware of both the theft and the fact that they had a pot on their head (Beatty, 2011). This move uses the physics engine of the game transgressively, resisting the rules of the game in an innovative way. It also introduces a light ridiculousness to a game that is ostensibly a serious fantasy, destroying the player's suspension of disbelief and revealing the game's limits.

A further constraint to the choices and freedom of players is the simple fact that game narratives generally have a finite amount of branching options. Despite trying to foster the player's sensation of authoring the story, the true author of the narrative remains in full control of what occurs within its bounds. The power of the player is restricted to the crossroads presented by the game (Cassidy, 2011; Murray, 1997). The logic of capital demands that games be efficient and effective; therefore, it is often not feasible due to time and money limitations to include large detailed story branches that some players will not experience. As previously discussed, these constraints are a necessary component of video game development but often have the effect of reinforcing the systems of the society of control. The limited branching options alter the player's narrative and the player's experience of the game, yet the medium's multi-linear capacity is not fully realized. The constraints on game developers present challenges for creating games that allow the player to make choices that affect the master narrative. In many cases, this dynamic spurs the development of games of control wherein the player's choices have minimal consequences in the master narrative.

The Witcher 2 (2011) is an exception to the trend in video games of player choices that have a minimal impact on the master story, and as such, offers another potential site of resistance to the society of control. The game is broken up into a prologue, three chapters, and an epilogue. At the end of chapter one, the player, as Geralt, must make a choice about whether to side with the special forces, or the nonhuman fighters. This decision truly changes the course of the master narrative, as the second and third chapters of the game are significantly different depending on the player's choice. If Geralt chooses the special forces, he spends the second chapter at the king's war camp outside of the town of Vergen. He completes quests for the king's camp soldiers and the leader of the special forces. If Geralt chooses the nonhuman fighters, he spends

the second chapter in Vergen, on the verge of war with the king's camp. He completes quests for citizens of Vergen and their dragon-slayer leader. The quests are not parallel between the two camps – the player experiences a largely different master narrative due to their decision in chapter one. This game rails against the logic of efficiency and profit, which would consider developing disparate versions of chapter two to be a waste of time and resources. Furthermore, it allows the player a deeper agency within the master narrative, unlike the illusion of agency provided by many other games that tout their decision mechanics, yet only allow choice within the player's narrative. *The Witcher 2* is a rare example of a game with choice mechanics that resist the demands of Empire, and its success sets a precedent for other games to become similar sites of transgression (Dutton, 2012).

As society has shifted from a confined society of discipline to a flexible society of control, the narratives told by Empire's exemplary medium – the computer, and the console as a computer – are presented as spaces of infinite possibility, but are governed by a system of controlled mobility. Berardi (2009) asks the essential questions about choice and perception of choice:

> At any given moment different paths open up in front of us, and we are continually presented with the alternative of going here or going there. Then we decide, we cut out from a set of infinite possibilities and choose a single path. But do we really choose? Is it really a question of a choice, when we go here rather than there? (p. 8)

When stripped of their representational aspects, narratives in video games are essentially reproductions of life under Empire, corresponding to the reality of controlled choices and participation. The games fetishize interactivity and glorify agency in the same way that neoliberal capitalism extols the virtues of freedom and deregulation. Galloway (2006) warns that

"while it might appear liberating or utopian, don't be fooled; flexibility is one of the founding principles of global informatics control" (p. 100). The mobility afforded in the narratives work under this same principle, appearing as play but operating within the structure of informatic control. Furthermore, as games lure players in with greater promises of agency, active play, and nonlinear narratives, they are becoming increasingly better at subtly reinforcing the paradigm shift to a society of controlled flexibility (Cover, 2004; Galloway, 2006).

Narrative choice in video games becomes play that is exploited as a productive force for Empire, and as such is deeply linked to the systems of control that Empire employs. The question of who controls the text is answered by players as themselves, but this is a prevalent deception in place throughout the culture of Empire, as the control remains firmly in the hands of the author, the programmer, and the system itself (Aarseth, 1997; Galloway, 2006). Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009) point to this illusion of free will as the most insidious means of control. It is when the subject of Empire believes they have free will and are free from ideology that the inherent ideology is the most effective. The players rehearse the narratives of Empire willingly, believing that they are in control and thus are at the greatest risk of being influenced.

In open-ended games, such as *Skyrim* or *Fallout 3*, the illusion of free will is the greatest, yet the ideologies of Empire run rampant. The games have a currency and merchants from which to buy various items, modeling the functioning of the capitalist economy despite the fact that *Skyrim* takes place in a medieval-type fantasy world, and *Fallout 3* takes place in a post-nuclear wasteland. The individualism and imperialism of the Western world is apparent in these games as well, featuring the player as a notable wanderer who is able to advance through the ranks of any culture that they please, and conquer the world of the game through exploration.

The pervasiveness of networks, computers, and consoles in contemporary society means that Empire is plugged into culture in the home, during leisure time, and within personal space. As cultural expression functions as the new locus of identity, people become more deeply invested both intellectually and emotionally in the narratives of video games. Neoliberal capitalism heralds interactivity and agency as empowerment and participatory democracy, while hiding the underlying ideologies and systems of control at work within them (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009).

Section 2: Subjectivity

> *Players do not simply read and reflect on the qualities of characters, they take on (in a strategically distanced way) the identity of a particular on-screen character and direct its fate. Such quasi-involvement suits well the postmodern spirit. Contemporary people have grown accustomed to the "masks" or personas that they put forward in myriads of settings. (Henricks, 2010, p. 28)*

The society of control requires subjects whose identities are fluid and fluctuating, rather than stable. To this end, the institutions, industries, and powers of Empire create the conditions for these types of agentic subjectivities through the influence of biopower. Through a network of disparate but interconnected systems, the needs, desires, and relationships of the subjects are cultivated in a manner beneficial to capital, and those subjects cyclically reproduce this subjectivity in others through their own industrial, domestic, and creative production. Desirable subject positions are also reinforced through language, media, and the production of meaning. Language organizes and orders subjectivity, while "the communications industries integrate the imaginary and the symbolic within the biopolitical fabric, not merely putting them at the service of power but actually integrating them into its very functioning" (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p. 33).

Media are integral to Empire, as they are responsible for constructing meanings and narratives that legitimize particular subjectivities and delegitimize others. Subjectivity relies upon the meanings that people give to their experiences, and thus subjectivity is mediated by the communications industries (Gill & Pratt, 2008; Hardt & Negri, 2000).

According to Hardt and Negri (2000), the current neoliberal capitalist system is driven by communication, which has become a principal component in establishing relations of production, consumption, and sociality. As such, the ideology of Empire permeates the communications industries, which then influences subjects through the technologies that characterize contemporary media. Subject positions are not inherent; they are assembled through biopower, which operates in Empire through the military-industrial-entertainment apparatus. Furthermore, subjectivity is not fixed, but is constructed and reconstructed continuously, yielding the subject compositions that the power structure requires (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983; Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Hardt & Negri, 2000).

Contemporary capitalism requires flexible machinic subjects, who are assembled as the processes of thought that society deems viable are increasingly modeled on communications technologies. Computers have become central to interaction, creativity, and thought patterns; encouraging society to embrace their new machinic subjectivities. Machinic subjectivity is then a part of a greater social system that privileges efficiency, algorithms, and plasticity. These cyborg identities have flexibility and autonomy within the system, but are restricted to particular ways of meaning-making and executing decisions (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Gill & Pratt, 2008; Hardt and Negri, 2000). The majority of virtual games advance the creation of these machinic identities by portraying the subjectivities of Empire as enjoyable and by immersing players in narratives with meaning-making systems that support neoliberal capitalist subject

positions. These games allow the player to take the identity of soldiers, free-willed agents, contract workers, cyborg hybrids, and corporate adventurers. Players of these types of games are trained to have flexible, multiple identities to become subjects in a shifting, unpredictable neoliberal work and leisure environment (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009).

The subject positions inscribed through video games work particularly well because of the player's identification with their in-game characters. Players often refer to their player character in first person, and recount in-game events as though they experienced them in the 'real' world. Designers craft games that encourage machinic subjectivities through the avatar of the player character. Indeed, much of the success of a video game depends on the player's willingness to identify with the player character, whether for a few hours while they play, or beyond the gamespace. Some characters resonate with the player long after the game has been completed, and the player will continue to identify aspects of their personality with the character they played in the game. This is the ideal, as RPGs are intended to submerse players within the life and narrative of the player character; thus, they rely heavily on creating a strong identification within the player. If the player accepts their role within the game, the narrative can begin to shape meaning. Subjects can forget, or willingly suspend their disbelief for a time, that there is any mediation occurring between them and the gamespace, minimizing the boundaries between virtual subjectivity and the subject positions that the player enacts. They transfer themselves into the role-playing environment of the game, and therefore, both their cognition and emotions are impacted by the logic of the game and the story it tells. Folkerts (2010) contends that identification in video games is much more intense than in film or literature, because of the affective and mental role-playing that occurs, as well as the player's ability to have direct control over the character. Ultimately, it is a cyclical process, for as the player

identifies with and controls the avatar, the avatar reflects and influences the player (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Folkerts, 2010; Jenkins, 2005).

RPGs focus upon the narrative aspects of the game, and narrative is how society makes sense of the world and creates meaning. As discussed previously, subjectivity is largely created through changing or shaping the meaning-making processes of subjects. RPGs, therefore, are a prime medium for the creation of Empire subjectivities, and machinic subject positions. When players immerse themselves in character roles, they are encouraged to accept the emotions and behaviours that the character expresses and they create belief in the world that the character inhabits. The game becomes a space where players can project their own desires and emotions, and have those aspects of their identities reflected back at them. The narrative is a system for understanding not only the world of the game, but also the external world (Murray, 1997). When the roles in games allow only some desires, ideas, and emotions to be explored, and present them in particular ways, the game constructs specific subjectivities.

Biopower relies upon social cohesion that works constructively yet does not become a unified force against Empire. Many RPGs feature narrative choice elements and game mechanics that encourage players to gain favour with other characters and create bonds, but the player is often rewarded beyond the satisfaction of friendship. This aspect of the game allows players to explore the need and desire for social ties, but presents the friendships within a framework of personal gain and individualism. This fosters subjects who are cooperative enough for capital to exploit their social lives, but who view sociability as a means to an end. *Dragon Age: Origins* (2009) involves a system of approval and disapproval with the player's companions, instead of being structured in terms of good and evil choices. The player's companions are widely ranging in personality and outlook, and the player can make choices that certain characters will approve

of while others disapprove. Early in the game, the witch Morrigan will disapprove if the player gives money to refugees, while the Grey Warden (similar to a knight) Alistair will approve. The player quickly learns to manipulate their friends through gifts (bribes) and by leaving certain characters at camp when entering situations where they would disapprove. This turns friendship into a quantifiable game of manipulating favour. Earning favour unlocks bonuses for the characters' abilities, making them more powerful allies at the player's side. Friendship, then, becomes a selfish endeavor – an algorithm to be learned (Wark, 2007, para. 31) – and the game creates subjects who perceive social relationships in a narcissistic, self-interested manner.

Likewise, a large portion of *Shin Megami Tensei: Persona 3* (2007) comprises of gaining the trust and friendship of random people around town and at the main character's high school. Each NPC has a detailed narrative that the player can uncover as the character becomes closer to them. The player must choose which people to see on any particular day, in hopes of increasing the relationships that matter the most. Choosing which relationships matter most depends upon the battle aspect of the game, as the characters are associated with different sets of abilities and leveling up the relationship means leveling up the related battle ability. Once more, the friendships that the player builds become self-serving. Many of these characters have heart-wrenching stories, such as the young man who is dying and is trying to figure out what his life means, or an elderly couple who are reminded of their lost son by the player character. The motivation to seek out these people within the game is to receive quantifiable upgrades in battle prowess. This system robs the narrative of its impact, and influences the player's choices in terms of which characters should receive the most attention. In constructing social links in this way, these games change the meaning and purpose of relationships into a system of personal profit and advantage – the logic of capital.

RPGs constrain players, scripting the player and training them to play particular roles in particular ways, while still encouraging a flexible identity within that framework. This is the ideal subject position of Empire, as subjects are made flexible within the structure and are able to take on many roles, but continue to function in productive and efficient ways within those roles. Through the player's avatar, the player is free to experiment with alternate identities, with one foot safely in the external world. This offers a sense of freedom that allows the player to experience and test different personality traits, moralistic choices, and behaviours, while believing these experiments to be fixed within the gamespace. However, in-game subjectivities have the potential to alter the players' perceptions of external meaning and can influence processes of signifaction.. Players engage with the character in the game, identify with him or her, and adopt different traits in different games (or even, in different playthroughs) (Folkerts, 2010; Henricks, 2010; Murray, 1997). Games are adept at interpellating the player as a subject, and many players accept their subjectivity willingly, suspending their disbelief for the sake of play (Althusser, 1972). This process creates a subject of postmodern assemblage who is able, in games and in the real world, to step in and out of different roles with ease. These subjects view their alternate personas as a series of masks or partial identities that they wear in different situations. Flexible subjects are the ideal subjects of Empire, as they are accustomed to the fast-paced climate of identity modification and substitution required in contemporary capitalism. Identities need to be fluid in a world of unstable contract work, protean immaterial labour, and uncertain boundaries between leisure and labour time (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Harvey, 1989).

Players can experiment with different identities, changing the way other characters in the game react to them, and which narrative options are available. Race and gender are common

traits that can be altered in RPGs. In *Skyrim*, it is as simple as the NPCs reacting favourably to a character whose race is Nord, but unfavourably to an elf. Race becomes more complicated in *Dragon Age: Origins*, because of the atmosphere of racism and oppression that the game world cultivates. An elf in *Dragon Age: Origins* is spoken to as though they are beneath other characters, and has a long introductory narrative for players to play through wherein a human lord abducts an elf bride on her wedding day. This story underscores the subjugation of the elves, while the human noble introductory story tells a narrative of privilege. These narratives are chosen when the player chooses a race for his or her character, and allows the player to experience different identities.

Gender is another variable that allows players to experiment with new personas. In *Dragon Age: Origins* and the *Mass Effect* series, certain romantic options are off-limits, depending on the player character's gender. Furthermore, much like in terms of race, characters in the game world react differently to differently gendered characters. For example, in *Mass Effect 2* (2010), the player signs up with gang as a bounty hunter to rescue a prospective ally. If the player is a female Commander Shepard, the man running the bounty hunter sign-up will make a comment about Shepard's attractiveness and ask if she isn't looking for the stripper sign-up instead. No such interaction occurs with the male Shepard. Many similar small narrative moments occur, depending on the gender of the player character. This allows the player to swap identities and cultivates the fluid subjectivity of Empire.

While the player can often choose the roles they will play in an RPG, there are games where they are thrust into an identity and they must adapt. This contributes to the systemic shift toward adjustable and compliant subjects who are prepared for the rapidly changing labour markets of Empire. Neoliberal capitalism needs subjects who can readily adapt to a variety of

ever-shifting tasks and requirements. In *The Witcher*, players must take on the role of the gruff, womanizing, white-haired Geralt. As Geralt, the player can make choices in the game, but the essential traits that characterize Geralt are already present at the beginning. When players play *The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword* (2011), they must play as the blonde young man Link, who is in love with Zelda. Geralt and Link have different motives and abilities, and the player learns to adapt and identify with each of them, as easily as putting on different masks.

Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009) identify one common role that gamers are made to identify with as "the man of action" (p. 81). Many protagonists in RPGs, from Link in *The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword* to Commander Shepard in the *Mass Effect* series, embody the man of action trope. The man of action character interpellates subjects as efficient decision-makers and eager 'do-ers' within the flexible identity discussed above. Commander Shepard can be male or female, black or white, and paragon or renegade, but will always be a man (or woman) of action who completes the mission. A paragon Shepard may make the choice to persuade an enemy to stand down, while the renegade Shepard simply kills the adversary. This choice provides a small amount of agency to the player, yet the man of action trope remains intact in either instance. The game is able to cultivate a delicate balance of subject positions, where the subject has a measure of autonomy and flexibility, and is simultaneously made to accept the man of action position. The subjectivity that RPGs reinforce is ideal for Empire, because the subjects are flexible, able to take on multiple roles, and ambitious achievers.

These games prepare players for the work of Empire, simulating actual subject positions. As Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter (2009) contest, "[video games] simulate the normalized subjectivities of a global capitalist order – consumer, commander, commanded, cyborg, criminal" (p. 192), and of course, the man of action. Games are beginning to be valued by

corporate capitalism as a resource for voluntary labour training, as games prime players for digital and immaterial work. Players acquire desirable skills through play, including: multi-tasking, prioritizing, initiative, problem-solving, efficient decision making, evaluation of risks, persistence, organization, etc. Corporations do not need to pay for this training, as players engage in gaming in their leisure time. Indeed, the players themselves absorb both the time and financial costs.

Often, players willingly accept the subjectivity offered to them in these games because they seem to operate within the benign circle of play. However, as Galloway (2006) argues, a separate magic circle of play, such as Huizinga (1955) theorizes, does not exist. Play and the external world reflect, impact, and respond to one another, each shaping the meaning and significance of the other. The player becomes a part of the human-machine system, and takes on the machinic subjectivity, or "machinic enslavement" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 458), of Empire (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009).

Although RPGs are effective at interpellating players into these subject positions, they are also a site of resistance. They are a place where the multitude can surge to the forefront, denying the subjectivities that Empire inscribes. Game culture has a strongly subversive element that continually arises to produce alternate options and resistant subjectivities. Gamers are notorious for finding the glitches, exploiting the weaknesses, and playing the games of Empire transgressively. Simply because Empire creates machinic subjectivities, does not mean that those subjects are fully controlled or compliant. Players find lines of flight from the given subject positions in RPGs, rebelling against the logic of capital (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Hardt & Negri, 2000).

A recent example of resistant gamer subjectivities is the Retake Mass Effect movement. The narrative of the *Mass Effect* series was deeply engaging for many of the players, and many became personally invested in the outcome. The developers had cultivated hype around the players' ability to largely influence the end of the narrative through their choices throughout the trilogy. However, when players reached the finale of *Mass Effect 3* (2012), many were severely disappointed by the ambiguity of the endings and their similarities regardless of previous narrative choices. The players' outrage sparked a massive resistance against the company, BioWare (and Electronic Arts, their parent company), and the multitude began to organize online in protest. Disrupting the player/author relationship, Mass Effect fans rallied together and demanded that the endings be improved. Within two days of the game's release, the Facebook group, "Demand a better ending to Mass Effect 3" formed, spearheading the Retake movement and garnering support from over 67,000 Facebook users ("Demand," 2012). In a gesture of protest, dissatisfied gamers donated money to the charity "Child's Play", raising $80 000 (Sinclair, 2012). Major gaming websites such as Kotaku, Gamespot, and Destructoid addressed the issue in several articles, and even outlets beyond the realm of gaming, including Forbes, covered the subject. The grassroots Retake Mass Effect movement functioned as a manifestation of the multitude, and as a rhizomatic resistance. Transgressive subjectivities took form and expression, as players refused to accept the subject positions forced upon them. As a result, BioWare released a free "Extended Cut" downloadable content (DLC) on June 26, 2012, which expanded upon the existing endings in a more satisfactory way (Stapleton, 2012). The resistance of the players affected real change, compelling the corporation to react and adapt to the massive surge of the multitude.

Another example of players challenging the subject positions offered to them in games is the "Freeman's Mind" machinima videos of *Half-Life* (1998). Machinima uses videos of gameplay and computer graphics in order to create cinematic sequences and short films. In the game *Half-Life,* the player must take the perspective of Gordon Freeman, the silent protagonist who must fight alien beings and government officials to escape the underground government science facility where an experiment has gone awry. In a traditional playthrough of this game, the player is interpellated into the man of action, which in this game takes the form of Freeman. The player, as Freeman, is resourceful, silent, and overcomes obstacles and enemies in pursuit of escape. The gameplay offers little room for resistant positions, as the player is as voiceless as Freeman himself who unable to impact the events as he progresses through the facility. The "Freeman's Mind" videos give a voice to both Freeman and the player, working against the silent man of action subject position that the game insists upon. This series of videos effectively reframes the man of action, as the Freeman depicted in them is a complaining and critical figure. He often draws attention to inconsistencies in the game world and alters the serious tone of the game with an irreverent lightness. Dripping with sarcasm, Freeman replies to the disembodied recorded voice of authority, "Yeah, 'high security'. That's why we leave armed missiles lying around for everyone to check out. It's part of the tour" (Scott, 2007, 1:25). In a later episode, characteristic of his critical attitude, Freeman states:

> Wow. I wasn't expecting this. This, this must be our box-smashing room. I mean, what? We have a bottomless pit, and the sides are all plate metal that looks strong enough to withstand a missile blast. This room must have cost a couple hundred thousand to build. Eat your heart out, taxpayers! This is where your money goes! (Scott, 2008, 2:43)

The videos change the stoic resoluteness of Freeman, morphing him into a vehicle for the player's questioning and transgressive perspectives. It also creates an alternative narrative for the game, as the player creates a new story in the form of the thoughts running through Freeman's mind as he traverses the gamespace. The transgressive Freeman in these videos creates a divergent story and a resistant subjectivity for the players to take up. Rather than accepting the man of action Freeman, the player can choose a different position, the critical, cynical, and questioning Freeman.

Resistance is an inherent force within the systems of Empire. Neoliberal capitalist subjects become accustomed to controlled flexibility, individual notions of agency, and competence with communication technologies. While Empire exploits subjects through these means, they are also central in the struggle against Empire. The players' familiarity with media and technology allows them to orchestrate avenues of resistance, using their machinic subjectivities subversively. "Freeman's Mind" is made possible through the technological capabilities of the players. Furthermore, the ideas of flexibility and agency that many players are inundated with contribute to situations like the *Mass Effect* ending protest, as some players come believe that they have the ability and the right to assert their desires and to spur changes according to their preferences. The structures that exploit subjects are the very systems that the subjects employ to struggle against the logic of Empire; neither resistance nor Empire can exist without the other.

The subject positions that players take on in RPG narratives serve the interests of Empire, and function to subtly alter the subjectivities of the players in the external world. Players are interpellated into flexible, profitable subjectivities and trained to function within the parameters required by the structures of neoliberal capitalism. Nevertheless, resistance is inseparable from

the system of Empire, and thus gamers also have the potential to reject controlled machinic subject positions and create new, transgressive multitudes. The subjectivities created by video games for Empire cannot be fully controlled, and gamers frequently utilize their machinic knowledge to enable alternative positions.

Section 3: Fragmentation and Systemic Integrity

> *What flexibility allows for is universal standardization (another crucial principle of informatic control). If diverse technical systems are flexible enough to accommodate massive contingency, then the result is a more robust system that can subsume all comers under the larger mantle of continuity and universalism. … The goal of total subsumption goes hand in hand with informatic control. (Galloway, 2006, p. 101)*

The flexible subject positions that these games advance are mirrored by the flexibility of many of the plots within the games, which are affected by player choice. These branching narratives are emblematic of the society of control and the subjectivities that it constructs, as the story branches are fragmented but ultimately hierarchical, contributing to the integrity of the overarching system. Hardt and Negri (2000) assess that the new paradigm of control operates through a structure of hierarchy and fragmentation that offers and esteems differentiation. Nevertheless, the fragmentation and customization remain contained within the intact system, therefore allowing for *seeming* lines of flight that do not truly constitute breaks from the system. These alternative paths satisfy the desire for difference and the drive for autonomy while ensuring that the subjects remain firmly within the bounds of the system's control. The system is widespread, accounting for a large range of potential difference and fragmentation. Each movement is enclosed by the structure, serving a purpose within the hierarchy of difference that the society of control constructs.

The flexibility of the society of control allows it to maintain systemic integrity in the face of divergence. The system is legitimized at all points, and its far-reaching structure subsumes each potential departure into its logic. Whereas universality and equality were prized in previous paradigms, the society of control favours particularity and treats each person/subject/situation differently. This is beneficial for the biopolitical power of neoliberal capitalism because the biopolitical production of subjects must be utilized regardless of their autonomy and differences. Social relations and individuality are profitable within the real subsumption. Diversity, in terms of culture, tastes, interests, etc., is commodified to an unprecedented extent as computerized customization and individual algorithms cater to a society of difference (Dyer-Witheford, 1999). A system that favours fragmentation while retaining its systemic integrity is able to govern the multitude and exploit their tendency toward variation (Hardt & Negri, 2000; Hardt & Negri, 2004). The multitude is governed through a variety of means, from production, to consumption, to cultural products such as video games. The mobility of the multitude is celebrated, and the society of control encourages the flexible subjectivities that ensue.

Another advantage of fragmentation lies within its capacity to prevent the multitude from unifying. Dyer-Witheford (1999) states: “Capital, in order to maintain its totalizing system, strives to prevent its variegated opponents from combining forces: dividing, splitting, and fracturing in order to maintain the systemic integrity of its world system” (p. 190). Capital relies upon individuation and separation within the structure in order for the structure to persist unabated. Controlled divergence within the system reduces the amount of threatening difference that resists capital and transgresses beyond the system. The fragmentation in the neoliberal capitalist information economy has intensified with the help of computer technologies. Video

games exist within this system of neoliberal capitalism, fragmentation, exploitation of difference, and control (Dyer-Witheford, 1999; Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009).

Computing technologies are crucial for the development of and demand for controlled fragmentation, because computers are able to account for a large variety of permutations and possibilities. The computer has what Murray (1997) refers to as an "encyclopedic capacity," which creates an "encyclopedic expectation" (p. 84) on the part of the player. The processing power of the computer as a medium allows for the narratives of video games to be more exhaustive than other narratives. The computer can house information about every potential aspect of the story, and is able to present this information at the player's behest. The encyclopedic expectation, therefore, is that video game narratives will be both wide in scope and comprehensive in depth. Players desire narratives with differing possibilities, branching stories, and hierarchies of choices that can be explored in detail. The player derives pleasure from navigating through the narrative, and through the space of the game world. However, as previously discussed, the player must feel as though their actions are important in order for the game to be meaningful. Rhizomatic structures are less satisfying, because the narrative becomes undetermined and formless; therefore, a hierarchy of branching narrative options offers a greater pleasure for the player (Murray, 1997). It also mirrors the society of control, as these branches remain within the framework of the system. The rules of the game and the structure of its narrative determine how players will diverge, much as the system of Empire offers controlled mobility.

Deleuze (1998) likens the society of control to a highway, and his metaphor can also be applied branching RPG narratives. A highway does not constrict or discipline the drivers, but "instead multipl[ies] the means of control" (p. 18). People are able to autonomously conduct

themselves along the highway, experiencing a sense of freedom and choice as to which roads to take, where to get on or off of the highway, and which lane to occupy. Yet the highway controls the drivers, as they can go anywhere they want on the highway but they cannot drive off of it, or go against its flow. The highway (and through extension, video games with branching narratives) exemplifies the controlled mobility that characterizes the epoch of Empire and the society of control.

RPGs with branching narratives are capable of reproducing themselves differently each time they are played, in terms of dialogue, order of events, and consequences. Both the narrative and the audience fragment as the game is played and different decisions are enacted. The player is aware that there are paths that they have not taken, and that their access to other parts of the narrative is becoming prohibited as they move through the game making choices. Players make strategic decisions about which branches to take, exploring the different potentialities enabled in the story (Aarseth, 1997). This individualization is central to the appeal of many RPGs, yet reinforces the control through fragmentation in contemporary capitalism. Much like the highway, the player can only follow the paths enabled by the narrative. They cannot go astray, even as they choose where to go within the series of paths.

Empire governs the multitude through cultural products, particularly through narratives that convey ideology and construct meaning. The power of Empire is legitimized and normalized through these narratives. When the narratives take on the structure of fragmentation within the confines of the system that reinforce its integrity, the methods of the society of control are validated. RPGs feature these nonlinear narratives, encouraging players to reenact their relationship to Empire and construct meaning in their lives in synchronization with the patterns of Empire (Hardt & Negri, 2000; Murray, 1997). Furthermore, when the players' choices are

linked to specific outcomes and consequences, the players learn to operate within the framework of the game in order to achieve their in-game goals and to progress the narrative. The designers, who work within the logic of the society of control and the relations of Empire themselves, create cause-and-effect relationships within the narrative that connect particular choices to particular outcomes. These linkages convey ideology and subtly connote a certain world-view. The hierarchy of the story branches is not a neutral, apolitical structure, but a system entrenched within the logic of Empire (Folkerts, 2010).

In KotOR, a player can make light side (good) or dark side (evil) choices throughout the game. Choosing different dialogue options, for example, will often open different narrative branches and side plots. The light side options are generally helpful and congenial, while the dark side choices often result in violence. Although the game presents both paths as equally valid, players are rewarded with extra side quests, more experience points, better items, and greater monetary rewards when they play a character that makes light side choices. A dark side character will often end up killing the NPCs who would have given them a side quest, and alienating potential allies. Commodities and profit are constructed as highly desirable rewards, modeling the capital-seeking initiative of Empire. Indeed, this is the case in many games (Apperley, 2006). A hierarchy is apparent here, as the game privileges those who play a more socially acceptable persona. The light and dark side branches function together to reinforce particular ways of interacting and solving problems. The dark side branches yield fewer benefits because they are more transgressive. However, it is noteworthy that the game includes and allows the dark side choices. In doing so, it is able to fragment the story, but control the differences and impose its own ideology upon them.

Video games can be replayed, or reloaded from a previous save, to allow for alternate paths to be explored. Doing so can reveal the narrative's biases and systemic integrity, as players become aware of the greater structure at play. Folkerts (2010) suggests that the questions that arise from multiple playthroughs can address the underlying system of the narrative:

> We continually signify the consequence of a decision after solving a quest or puzzle, and compare this particular outcome to other imaginable alternatives. Moreover games offer the opportunity to repeat the same challenge over and over again, which enables us to freely examine and consider the intrinsic or implied possibilities and outcomes. Did we choose well here? Does this outcome lead to the imagined course of the story, or to a desired state of our avatar? And, even more important for artistic meta-reflexive contemplation: what does the designer want to express about reality by connecting this choice to that particular outcome? (p. 113)

Players are able to compare the consequences of their choices in multiple playthroughs, and ask questions about how the ways in which the story fragments support the overarching meaning or structure. If players are critical, this line of thought can become a node of resistance where the machinations of Empire are exposed and challenged. If players are not critical, multiple playthroughs may only serve to reinforce the meanings built into the choices of the game and shape the players' perspective (Folkerts, 2010).

The flexibility and fragmentation of the narrative is a part of the process of informatic control. The more that a system is able to account for and accommodate divergence, the more that system is able to subsume all possibilities, relations, and differences. The encyclopedic capabilities of computing have made this widespread informatic control possible throughout Empire, which is able to paradoxically use its flexibility to subsume division under one

universalizing system. Likewise, divergent paths in video games allow the game to subsume its players within its totalizing structure of informatic control. Difference is completely reorganized within the logic of informatics. Race, gender, morality, and narrative choices in RPGs are all avenues for systemic dominance, while – like Deleuze's highway – seemingly offering freedom (Galloway, 2006).

When fragmentation is controlled in this way, it strengthens the integrity of the system. This is particularly apparent when transgression is anticipated and subsumed within the structure itself. In RPGs, a transgressive player will often attempt to attack the NPCs in the game. In *The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword*, the NPCs generally do not react when the player hacks, slashes, and shoots at them. The player engages in a transgressive action that is external to the narrative and reality of the game world. The choice to attack the NPC yields no response by the system, and thus doing so provides an avenue beyond the system. In *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* (2002), the divergent act of attacking an NPC is anticipated, and the NPC reacts to the attack by fighting back. The player can kill NPCs, and doing so will often cause the city guards to arrest or attack them. In *Morrowind*, the possible choice to attack an NPC is subsumed within the game's system, and does not provide a line of flight from the game or break the consistency of the game world.

Mass Effect 3 takes the effect of this transgressive player tendency to another level, as the player makes their final choice at the end of the trilogy. The fate of the universe depends upon the choice that the player, as Commander Shepard, makes at the game's end. An AI boy called The Catalyst offers the player three narrative options to complete the story. Unmentioned, however, is the fourth option built into the game by the developers. If the player, instead of walking to the option of their choice, turns around and shoots The Catalyst, he will become

angry and the player will doom all of the species of the universe. The developers, aware that some players would shoot at The Catalyst (‘just for fun’), built story-changing consequences into the game, which keeps that choice within the bounds of the game world, and preserves its systemic integrity. To reiterate, a system that is flexible and accommodates fragmentation within itself is able to subsume all choices and ultimately maintain control.

Resistance is possible when players find paths that were not anticipated and are not controlled by the system of the game. This frequently takes the form of players exploiting glitches in the game, which allows them to complete the game in unintended ways and bypass major plot points. Both *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (1998) and *Diablo* (1996) have glitches that players have used to complete speed runs of the games that circumvent almost all of the gameplay and narrative. This is an unintended option in the game, and provides a true line of flight from the universalizing fragmentation found in RPG narratives that anticipate and include such activities. The *Ocarina of Time* speed run completes the game, which is normally twenty to forty hours, in twenty-one minutes and forty-five seconds. The player uses various glitches to skip to locations that should be off-limits at that point in the narrative and to obtain items that he is not supposed to have access to. Furthermore, he employs strategies to kill the final boss that subvert the anticipated maneuvers (SwordlessLink, 2012). The game narrative changes in new ways when these flaws are exploited, but the game does not have the flexibility to subsume these changes within the logic of its system of informatics.

Similarly, the *Diablo* speed run takes only three minutes and twelve seconds to complete the game and defeat the final boss. Once more, the player employs glitches to destabilize the rules of the game. He is able to manipulate item drops, avoid lengthy cut-scenes, and kill Diablo with a very low level character as a result of a health glitch (FuNLighttt, 2009). In each of these

speed runs, external cheats and hacks are not applied to the game, and the player merely manipulates the unintentional faults in the system of the game code. Unable to account for fragmentation from the planned narrative and game rules, the system falters. Glitches are a common node of player resistance to systemic integrity.

When fragmentation and difference are not accounted for by the system, the potential for resistance arises. As a result, Empire, and its exemplary media – video games – must be adaptable and offer differing paths in order to remain in control. Although the narratives of these RPGs are branching, divided, and different for different players, they retain their integrity nonetheless. Systemic integrity is supported by the division of the texts; their status as flexible hypertexts allows them a greater reach as they incorporate potential lines of flight (Aarseth, 1997; Aarseth, 1999). The narrative choices available to the player amplify the relations of Empire, as imperial ideologies are embedded in each option, brought there by both the player and the developers. RPGs are the ideal medium for the fragmented structure of controlled mobility, as the narratives carry meanings and consequences that are sometimes absent in other genres, and players must enact their choices rather than simply watching the events unfold (Bogost 2006; Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009).

Conclusion

Empire creates narratives to provide culture with specific ways of constructing meaning that are beneficial for maintaining the structures and systems that form the core of its power and control mechanisms. Video games, as the exemplary medium of Empire, feature narrative choices that operate as a reinforcement of, response to, and component of the society of control and the logic of neoliberal capitalism. Through providing an illusion of choice, these narratives embody a greater level of controlled mobility than is possible in traditional linear texts. They

assemble flexible, desirable neoliberal subjectivities, enabled by the willingness of the players and the allure of leisure. Additionally, these narratives enact the universalizing principle behind Empire's adaptability and flexibility, increasing their systemic integrity through fragmentation.

Nonetheless, nodes of resistance are entrenched within every aspect of Empire's structure, and the force of the multitude provides lines of flight and transgressive potentialities within video games and the narratives they convey. Players exploit oversights and glitches, redefine the subjectivities embedded within the games, and provide transgressive alternatives to the options offered by the narrative. Occasionally a game which defies the norms of Empire will emerge, or the players will achieve change in a game through an outcry of the multitude. This response to the logic of Empire invades the gamespace and generates continuous cycles of conflict, which capital attempts to contain. While the real subsumption of life by capital is pervasive, it is always infused with the resistance of the multitude and a persistent struggle against the system.

As video games reach increasingly greater levels of popularity and societal importance, the narratives they tell become central sites of cultural meaning-making; they are influential in shaping perspectives on the world and creating schemas for understanding reality. The types of choices offered in these narratives are reflective of the choices found within the system of Empire, and are used by Empire to reinforce its logic. The resistance of the players to capital's totalizing logic provides evidence that the multitude does not simply accept the systems of understanding given by Empire, but will consistently find the means and avenues to struggle against it.

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