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Measuring Player Perceptions of Freedom and Control in Modded and Unmodded Versions of Bethesda's Skyrim: A Qualitative Play Study

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MEASURING PLAYER PERCEPTIONS OF FREEDOM AND CONTROL IN MODDED AND UNMODDED VERSIONS OF BETHESDA'S *SKYRIM*: A QUALITATIVE PLAY STUDY

by

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ABSTRACT

This interdisciplinary dissertation explores perceptions of control in modded and unmodded versions of Bethesda's sandbox video game *Skyrim*. Sandbox games are known for greater choice options that suggest greater perceptions of control for gamers. Sandbox games also generally encourage the use of user-generated creations called modifications (mods) that users can download to personalize their games. While we need philosophy to understand and define control as a concept, we also need psychology to understand how users perceive control in media studies. At present, qualitative academic research that measures gamer perceptions of control is non-existent as is research on how users articulate their experiences with mods. Interviews were conducted with twenty-seven individuals who identified as gamers to analyze these perceptions of control in a game like *Skyrim*. The first chapter is introductory and outlines key terms for the dissertation as well as the play study's methodology. The second chapter examines philosophical and psychological perceptions of control that correspond with negative freedom (freedom from) and positive freedom (freedom to). While no game can promise radical free will because they have been programmed in advance, the information here may be used to demonstrate how perceptions of control might influence game design. The third chapter continues this exploration of perceived control through genre analysis, revealing the relationship between greater perceptions of control and mod support in sandbox video games. The fourth chapter presents the first two findings from the play study that demonstrate how mods influence player perceptions of control. The fifth chapter reveals how gamers of the play study discuss their perceptions of control video games in their own words with an emphasis on positive and negative freedom and generic conventions. The final chapter provides challenges for game design and scholarly qualitative analysis for future research based on findings in the play study.

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As I reflect on this process, I was almost burnt out with the medium that enticed me to enter academia. However, as I kept writing and researching, my relationship with games improved dramatically. After completing this dissertation, I am now not just a scholar of game studies, but a fan once again. Of course, this journey would not have been possible without the support of many people.

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“I always find it interesting when, um, a new PC game comes out and someone says, ‘Oh, you should get this mod,’ or, ‘You should check out this mod of the game.’ Or the Final Fantasy remakes are a good example. A lot of those have been remade on Steam, and everyone says, ‘Well, if you’re going to get that, make sure you get this mod to make the game play better.’ Just the idea of that is really interesting because this is a game that developers spent a lot of time working on and putting their stuff into, and, like, it can kind of almost seem, like, offensive if you can go on and say, ‘Oh, make these changes to this.’ But, no, mods are kind of being seen now though as they either improve on or change the experience of a game, and it’s kind of like taking a completed package and making it your own, which I think a lot of artists kind of appreciate now as opposed to, ‘That’s my piece of art. How dare you touch that?’ Now, it’s, ‘We want to give this to the players and let them do what they choose to do with it.’” - Play Study Participant 2-M

Video game modifications (mods) are user-generated creations that alter a video game’s code to enhance its gameplay mechanics, narrative, or aesthetics. Mods can be minor tweaks (for example, adding idle chatter or weather in the game world) or total conversions that create a new game. One of my favorite mods is a minor aesthetic alteration. Paradox Studios’ *Stellaris* is a 2016 strategy game in which gamers create a galactic empire through space warfare or diplomacy. The player-chosen civilization is placed in a single star system on a galactic map. Gamers are free to explore other star systems, unlock research that will assist the growing empire, and interact with other civilizations that will spawn the further the player’s science ships venture into the galaxy. This process will continue until the player decides to turn off their

computer, or they are wiped out by a rival empire. After a couple typical playthroughs (as well as after downloading the *Utopia* expansion pack), I discovered a mod called "Animated Aquilese Portraits" by a modder named Silfae. When activated, the gamer's intergalactic race becomes beautiful bald eagles previously unavailable in the game.

Perhaps I saw some silly memes featuring bald eagles that either reinforce liberal or conservative values depending on how the memes are disseminated. Maybe I find bald eagles beautiful. While I do not remember my exact motivations, I originally downloaded the mod from Steam as a joke so that I could create the 'Merican Space Eagles. I devised a hilarious back story for this race from the planet known simply as 'Merica. Generally, they are great people, but they incessantly talk about that time they won World War 2. The Space Eagles represented the best of American contradictions. They were generally xenophilic, yet militaristic and solitary. They were egalitarian, yet bureaucratic. They were environmentalists, yet proficient miners. Ultimately, the mod allowed me to satirize American culture while I became the most dominant force in the galaxy. Although the 'Merican Space Eagles started as a joke, I realized that the only way I could tell the story of this mighty civilization was through Silfae's mod. The base game has many unique portraits featuring avian, humanoid, fungal, and other species. However, none of these match Silfae's mod that looks so professional that it rivals official character art in the base game. For me, no other character race can represent the 'Merican Space Eagles and, correspondingly, Silfae's mod can never represent another civilization while I am playing the game.

Figure 1. The majestic 'Merican Space Eagles.

The "Animated Aquilese Portraits" mod enhanced my overall experience with the game, making it much more enjoyable and conducive to my gaming needs. I was elated when my Space Eagles colonized a new planet. I was dejected when my empire was wiped out by one of the game's built-in crises that results in a Game Over unless properly handled. I felt accomplished when I took down an "awakened" fallen empire that perceived me as a threat. I have played *Stellaris* for 467 hours, and I even shared a playthrough with friends in my only Twitch video to date in part because of this mod. While the mod itself mattered very little in terms of streaming, the mod seemed to impact my confidence because my most successful campaigns involved the 'Merican Space Eagles.

Stellaris 2.0 was released in February 2018, and it is an improvement in many ways. However, "Animated Aquilese Portraits" is incompatible with *Stellaris 2.0* and the eagle portraits will not load in the updated game. *Stellaris 2.0* has substantial gameplay upgrades that were not in *Stellaris 1.0+,* but because this mod currently does not work, one of the primary

reasons why I played has been removed, rendering my gaming experience incomplete. I spent more than $60 on *Stellaris* and its expansions, yet a free add-on made a significant impact on me as a gamer in part because I felt like my enjoyment and sense of control were directly linked to how this mod embodied the ‘Merican Space Eagles and their galactic story. It almost sounds absurd, but I do not believe I can play *Stellaris* without the mod that created the vaunted ‘Merican Space Eagles. May they rise again one day.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

Defining Control for Philosophers and Psychologists

The ‘Merican Space Eagles kept me engaged as a player. Player engagement in game design is an umbrella term for gamer perceptions of involvement within a game (Brockmyer et al. 624). Control (actual or perceived) is the underlying mechanism governing principles of engagement in both physical and digital environments. My interests lie in uncovering just how important these perceptions of control are to media engagement and enjoyment, specifically what role mods play in understanding these perceptions. After all, a mod was instrumental in how I played *Stellaris*, even though it literally only changed the character portraits of the beings in my galactic empire. While I could have devoted my time to researching Silfae’s code and making the “Animated Aquilese Portraits” mod compatible with *Stellaris 2.0*, I have instead used my experience to set the stage for what video game mods can teach us about perceptions of control, freedom, video game engagement, genre, and even game design.

This dissertation explores perceptions of control in modded and unmodded sandbox video games. Sandbox games may be inspired by real settings as is the case for the *Grand Theft Auto* series, or they may share similarities with high fantasy or science fiction, such as *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* and *Planet Nomads*. However, all sandbox games share two important qualities: they provide more choices than other genres to allow the gamer to act freely, and they generally allow (or even encourage) mod support in their respective game designs. The “Animated Aquilese Portraits” example demonstrates that I was personally impacted by this mod. My example is anecdotal, but my research is bolstered by qualitative interviews with 27

gamers who were asked to play a modded or unmodded version of Bethesda's 2011 sandbox role-playing game *Skyrim*.

The qualitative play study combines two fields of research. The philosophical component emphasized perceptions of control in lay individuals while the study's use of video game modifications as tools to enhance certain video game titles is situated within game studies. The play study on modded and unmodded versions of *Skyrim* sought to answer three research questions that will be addressed throughout this dissertation:

1. Do user-generated modifications ("mods") change the experience of perceived control as compared to the official version of the game released by the video game studio?
2. How do gamers believe games compare to everyday life in terms of having control over outcomes?
3. What can gamers' beliefs on perceptions of control and user-generated mods reveal about game design for certain video games?

These three research questions require both philosophical and psychological frameworks. Philosophy and psychology are two fields with so much in common that researchers often have a difficult time discussing their differences. This dissertation will not focus on this debate, but a primary difference between both fields is that philosophy emphasizes human existence while psychology probes human behavior. Both philosophy and psychology paint a holistic portrait of an abstract phenomenon like control. While we need philosophy to understand and define control as a concept, we need psychology (especially in media studies) to understand how we perceive control.

Control itself is linked to autonomy. Autonomy is defined as a state of independence in which an agent is free from external influence. Autonomy is important to human perceptions of

agency because we like to believe that we have the freedom to function independently, depending on our motives. An autonomous agent is one who chooses to perform their own actions and can evaluate them alongside others. Agency is linked to autonomy, and as Susanne Eichner surmises, "While action is defined as the actual process of acting, agency refers to the general ability to perform these actions" (24). Although autonomy is an agent's independence, agency is a bit more nuanced. Luciano Floridi notes that an agent is someone/something who can transform an environment in which they are situated, can produce effects, or exercise power over time (140). According to Floridi, agents often operate in levels of abstraction (LoAs), which "is (usually) a finite but non-empty set of observables, which are expected to be the building blocks in a theory characterized by their very choice" (32). Through these proposed levels of abstraction, Floridi believes agents interact with the environment, are autonomous, and can adapt to situations depending on prior experiences (140). These criteria provide the requirements for Floridi's overall argument for moral culpability of actions as well as what it means to become ethical information organisms (inforgs) in the Digital Age of interactive media.

Scholars have attached multiple terms concurrent with agency, including active intentionality (Mayr 6), resource allocation available to the agent (Eichner 25), and metacognition (Eichner 52). Additionally, all video games will have some combination of these qualities. However, the most integral component to agency is an agent's perception of control in physical and digital worlds that support their sense of autonomy. Susanne Eichner notes that this "feeling of effecting change and being in control is thus central for the perception of agency, but at the same time hard to grasp, since people are usually not aware of their metacognitive activities" (52). For Eichner, perceptions of control are essential to human agency, but control

requires substantial metacognition to follow through with an action, having the ability to compare the action to others, and mulling over potential consequences.

Many philosophers have analyzed and discussed control from the standpoint of free will, or the belief that humans can freely make these choices without restraints. Although philosophers are divided on free will, they generally fall into one of three camps. Advocates of radical free will (sometimes called libertarians or even existentialists) believe that humans are completely free. Determinists believe that all actions are external to free will as previous antecedents create all "choice" scenarios. Compatibilists believe that determinism and free will are compatible without being logically inconsistent (conversely, incompatibilists believe that free will is incompatible in a deterministic universe). These metaphysical doctrines are varied and sometimes contentious, but at the heart of the free will dilemma is the question of how much control an individual wields in their life.

While many philosophers investigate control from the standpoint of free will, others try to pivot away from the term. For video games, I am using Daniel Dennett's concept of "elbow room," which refers to the amount of space in which an agent may freely maneuver. Dennett argues in *Elbow Room* that, "The root idea of control, which has been elevated into a technically precise concept in cybernetics and automata theory, is (in ordinary terms) that A controls B if and only if the relation between A and B is such that A can drive B into whichever of B' s normal range of states A wants B to be in" (57). Dennett suggests control is measured by the degree to which an agent may influence a situation, outcome, or even another agent. This means that if A wants to put B in a certain state or event but does not have the ability to force B to do anything, A wields no control over what B does (57). Dennett believes that "elbow room" is the ideal of control so "that we can face the world with as much elbow room (as large a margin for

error and as little relevant uncertainty) as we can get" (80). This degree of control is integral to game design as games are often defined, analyzed, promoted, and reviewed by what they allow and disallow the gamer to accomplish within the digital world.

With Dennett's definition in mind, control is an important principle in human agency. For example, humans may typically report that they are in control of a situation when it favorably impacts them or places them in a position of power, while expressing a lack of control when a situation does not go as planned or produces unintended consequences. Researchers note that there is a difference between actual and perceived control, two topics generally explored in psychology. Actual control is an objective reflection of what an agent controls as it "is a term often used within theory and research to describe whether the nature of control over contingencies is truly within the person's control or not" (Scott and Weems 516). In video games, there will always be limitations that prevent the gamer from doing whatever they wish if it is not allowed by the game's code. Conversely, perceived control "is the belief that one can determine one's own internal states and behavior, influence one's environment, and/or bring about desired outcomes" (Wallston et al. 5). Perceived control in video games governs what the gamer thinks they might have control over, and how their gaming experience is shaped as a result. Researchers generally agree that "the consequences of perceived control will likely vary depending on the actual control present in the situation" (Wallston et al. 6). However, the desire for "elbow room" can also lead to the illusion of control "that was observed in a series of experiments in which people were more likely to attribute personal success to skill rather than luck. For example, participants in a lottery were more likely to believe they would win if they were free to choose their own lottery numbers than if their numbers were randomly assigned (Langer, 1975)" (Pagnini, Bercovitz, and Langer 92). Even though perceived control relies on

what is actually within an agent's control, believing that one is in control can have a significant impact on mental health to the point that perceived control is linked to mindfulness (Pagnini, Bercovitz, and Langer 95).[1] For this reason, "perceived control can be thought of as a key component of either our trait personality makeup or our cognitive processing that, in either case, enhances functioning and, ultimately, survival" (Infurna and Reich 3).

This distinction makes control a versatile concept for analyzing a nebulous term like agency in game studies because it can be applied to two additional philosophical terms: negative and positive freedom. Negative freedom is freedom from external restraints, such as physical obstacles or individuals who influence our lives. If an agent's sense of negative freedom is high, they may believe that they can do whatever they wish. If negative freedom is low, an individual may feel that they are beholden to someone or something that controls their actions. Many classical philosophers, including Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and John Stuart Mill, generally favored negative freedom to its counterpart as they believed liberty was purest when uninhibited by restraints (Takala 227). Conversely, positive freedom is defined as the capacity to act. While an individual with high negative freedom may technically do whatever they wish, is that truly what they desire? For example, the allure of so much negative freedom might inhibit the desire for a different objective or goal that cannot be measured through opportunities and obstacles alone. In other words, positive freedom "requires that the agent's actions depend upon his own ideas and purposes, not upon external influences" (Frederick 43). As these external influences are linked to negative freedom, a greater sense of positive freedom might be linked to evaluating desires and setting goals for one's self when presented with the opportunities before them.

[1] Pagnini, Bercovitz, and Langer suggest primary and secondary control. Primary control suggests a situation can be changed even if it is not readily obvious while secondary control suggests perceptions can be altered if the environment cannot change (95). This distinction is interesting, but outside the scope of this dissertation.

Video games confirm the malleability of these two concepts that are predominately linked to political philosophy. Philosophers like Isaiah Berlin believed that negative freedom was a better model for freedom because it is "a truer and more humane ideal than the goals of those who seek, in the great, disciplined, authoritarian structures the ideal of 'positive' self-mastery by classes, or peoples, or the whole of mankind" (52). Classical liberals and political philosophers ultimately valued negative freedom for two reasons. First, "negative liberty was understood to be an inherent good in itself, independent of its consequences" (Bowring 157). In other words, freedom of individuals should be valued at all costs. Second, some philosophers were suspicious of positive freedom because they believed it was the more coercive form of freedom of the two that emphasized power for a privileged few. The fear was that positive freedom "could easily destroy every 'negative' liberty that they held sacred" (Berlin 44). Of course, Berlin was not wholly against positive freedom, but he was cognizant that it was more likely to be misused as a "specious disguise for brutal tyranny" (Berlin 13).

However, some philosophers argue that negative freedom alone is meaningless. If negative freedom is merely an opportunity concept as described by Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, this means that "some [freedoms] are crucial, others highly valued, some immoral and still others just trivial and stupid" (Nys 217). In other words, freedom has degrees of valuation, and humans "always need to distinguish important opportunities and those which are far less important" (Nys 218). While opportunities are important, implementation of positive freedom can help reveal, for example, what might be a truly worthy goal, and what falls under "just because you can does not mean you should."

Coincidentally, there is a link between control and freedom that reveals the need to combine philosophical and psychological concepts for this game studies dissertation. Carter notes of freedom, "It is useful to think of the difference between the two concepts in terms of the difference between factors that are external and factors that are internal to the agent." Although this distinction is oversimplified, it suggests that actual control might be influenced by negative observations of freedom while perceived control could be a representation of what an agent might accomplish with the positive freedom afforded to them. Chapter Five presents data that gamers think about control in this framework, but with these definitions of control and freedom in mind, I will next explain how perceptions of control serve my research in media studies.

Control's Role in Media Studies and Player Engagement

Control was defined with both philosophical and psychological principles, but psychological principles are needed to expand on how we usually perceive control in media studies. As noted at the beginning of this chapter, engagement is a fundamental component of gamer interaction that is related to control. Definitions associated with engagement include familiar terms like interest, pleasure, and enjoyment alongside more academic terms like flow, transportation, and immersion. Arguably, pleasure might be central to these concepts as utilitarians pair the benefits of pleasure with their painful consequences. Philosopher Jeremy Bentham notes of the relationship between pleasure and pain, "They alone point out what we ought to do and determine what we shall do; the standard of right and wrong, and the chain of causes and effects, are both fastened to their throne" (6). Bentham's view on pleasure and pain is known as the hedonic calculus, which posits that a pleasurable action is the right one if the

benefits of pleasure outweigh pain or consequences. The result is a formula in which humans might maximize their pleasure for hedonistic purposes, or they may wish to reject pleasure to live an austere lifestyle if that is more agreeable.

For the purposes of this dissertation, it is worth noting that there is a nuanced difference between the often-interchangeable words pleasure and enjoyment. Pleasure is usually described as primal, immediate, and fleeting (i.e. once the sensation wears off, an agent might seek pleasure again). On the other hand, enjoyment usually denotes that an agent must work for such a desired state, which might lead to a sense of accomplishment (see flow below). This means that pleasure and enjoyment might not always correlate. For example, there might be moments or events in which an individual prefers not to be in control, such as spectator sports, professional wrestling, amusement park rides, or even carpooling on long road trips. However, when the expectation is that a medium like a video game is interactive and relies on the gamer to input certain functions, the assumption is control and enjoyment are not irrelevant to each other, which seems to support current research.

Scholarly links between perceptions of control and emotional responses like enjoyment and pleasure exist. Although primarily used in student and teacher learning discourses, the Control-Value Theory proposed by Reinhard Pekrun suggests that perceptions of control can affix value appraisal to certain emotions. For example, enjoyment is derived from a positive experience and a high degree of control; anger from a negative experience and a high degree of control; frustration from a positive or negative experience with a low degree of control; and boredom following neither a positive or negative valuation to the experience (320). Fledging research indicates that some scholars have even applied Pekrun's model to game design, specifically for assessing the learning potential in serious games. Schrader and Nett used this

model for analyzing perceptions of control in a serious game known as *Liver Defense* and note that by manipulating certain aspects of the game, "it was possible to examine the differences in the reporting experiences of the more prominent achievement emotions, namely enjoyment, which is positively valenced, as well as boredom, anger and frustration, which are negatively valenced" (63). Enjoyment is also linked to a sense of competence with a gamer's chosen video game as greater competence means the gamer is more likely to play for extended durations (Crutzen, van't Riet, and Short 17). These emotions are linked to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's flow theory commonly used in media studies, in which flow occurs when an individual is so focused on an activity (in terms of both challenge and ability level) that they become absorbed. According to Csikszentmihalyi, "Flow differs from the homeostatic approaches to happiness because it consists neither in seeking to satisfy a limited and closed set of needs for pleasurable stimulation nor in attempting to avoid unpleasant sensations" (159). In other words, an activity does not necessarily have to be pleasurable to produce interesting outcomes. In fact, an unpleasant situation could result in flow if the agent responds competently. The "Animated Aquilese Portraits" mod enhanced my perceptions of enjoyment as discussed earlier, but it also might have had an impact on my sense of flow. *Stellaris* is a challenging game that becomes even more challenging as other empires (including powerful archaic fallen empires) perceive the player's empire to be a threat and declare war on them. The game becomes even more chaotic once a "game-ending" crisis forces all extant civilizations to sign a peace treaty in order to combat a randomized galactic threat. These challenges are occasionally nerve-racking and unenjoyable. With such challenges built into the game, the learning curve is somewhat steep, and skill is usually determined by how long the player's empire survives. If the gamer is unable to adapt to these challenges, their empire is wiped out. My skill level gradually increased over time,

and the mod was a curious outlying factor that oftentimes contributed to a flow-like state that kept me invested in these challenges.

Linked to flow is another psychological theory called transportation. Although both theories emphasize absorption in an activity, flow does not require a narrative. However, individuals "who are transported are fully concentrating on the story. They often lose track of time or fail to notice events occurring around them because of their focused involvement in the world of the narrative" (Green, Brock, and Kaufman 315). As previously addressed, I invested several hundreds of hours into *Stellaris*, and most of those came after I downloaded the "Animated Aquilese Portraits" mod. When in a flow-like state, *Stellaris* is a game that gamers can become lost in to the point that hours pass by. Granted this might have to do with the amount of wait time that goes into colonizing planets, building naval vessels, and conducting research, but successful transportation in a game like *Stellaris* will occur once the gamer becomes completely invested in the galactic story that their empire is sharing with their foes, allies, or neutral observers. Despite these long bouts of waiting (or staring at my computer screen), the 'Merican Space Eagles kept me so focused on their progress that I willingly lost track of time to advance their mission.

Both flow and transportation are linked to perceptions of control, and all terms are associated with immersion, which is the willful suspension of disbelief. More specifically, Janet Murray calls immersion "the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality, as different as water is from air, that takes over all of our attention, our whole perceptual apparatus" (98). Whereas flow and transportation were not explicitly mentioned by my play study's participants, it is interesting to note that immersion often was, and certain participants noted that they began to use mods to enhance immersion. Taken together, these components of player

engagement create the best possible individual experience for those involved. Whether an individual reaches a flow-like state, is properly transported, or becomes immersed in a digital world, it is reasonable to suggest that enjoyment in video games is often directly linked to high perceptions of personal control within the digital world (Rogers, Dillman Carpentier, and Barnard 31). Although Rogers, Dillman Carpentier, and Barnard emphasize narratives and engaging characters in their study, the interactive nature of games suggests that games that are primarily analyzed by their mechanics rather than narrative structure (an approach called ludology) can produce any of these feelings.

All these analogous terms can be linked to my own research, which is that control (actual or perceived) is the fundamental mechanism of agency in game design. A common expression in media studies called "breaking immersion" occurs when one's engagement is disturbed. If an event happens that is outside a user's control, this sense of powerlessness may ruin what was otherwise a positive experience. This sensation is similar for the other concepts. For example, one's sense of control can determine levels of enjoyment and pleasure. However, Bentham's principles of pleasure and pain can be twisted so that a painful option might be mistaken as the "correct" choice. Further, an individual can be taken out of a flow-like state when the challenge exceeds their abilities, forcing them to give up. Like broken immersion, this abandoned feeling might be triggered by factors outside of an individual's control, which can result in frustrating or negative emotions if the individual cannot overcome their struggles. Lastly, transportation could be destroyed when one's favorite media character is suddenly killed off, and the individual is powerless to stop it. These feelings of powerlessness can be minor or major, silly or upsetting, intentional or unintentional, but they can significantly impact one's experience. This impact

usually leads back to the importance of perceptions of control in physical and digital environments.

Perceptions of Control in Video Game Choices and Genres

Perceptions of control and agency are not only popular in philosophy, but also video games. While many forms of media are now interactive, these worlds and/or virtual arenas will either contain constraints that allow certain actions while inhibiting others, or they possess predetermined outcomes (or both). However, a user's role in interactive media is important because their engagement is vital. Although this environment exists in a deterministic state, there is no way it can operate without the individual making "choices" to advance its functions. In other words, the participant's choices matter, even if there is an illusory sense of control predicated on how much control the digital environment allows the individual to think they possess.

Scholarship on video game agency is broad, but choices in video games often refer to narrative, aesthetic, and gameplay options. Espen Aarseth surmises in "A Narrative Theory of Games" that video games will have some combination of a World, Agents/Characters, Objects, and Events (2). The combination of these features will influence agency and, more specifically, player perceptions of control. For example, Objects "can be categorized in terms of their malleability: a) Static, non-interactable objects b) Static, usable objects c) Destructible (buildings in a RTS [Real-Time Strategy]) d) Changeable (e.g. weapons in *Resident Evil 4*) e) Creatable (E.g. armor in *World of Warcraft*) f) Inventible (creatures in *Spore*, computers in *Minecraft*)" (4). By this definition, Objects would consist of aesthetic or mechanic options within a game. These

Objects "determine the degree of player agency in the game: a game which allows great player freedom in creating or modifying objects will at the same time not be able to afford strong narrative control" (4). For Aarseth, narrative control is associated with Agents and Events. He writes, "Agents and Events, are describing not so much gameplay as author agency" (4). Aarseth's claims are useful, even if he goes to significant lengths to argue that video games are unlike traditional media. However, he concludes that his "model presented here does not account for 'content' aspects of ludo-narratives, such as emotions, themes, style etc. It could still be used to analyze and suggest design decisions, even if the main purpose is to be descriptive, not prescriptive" (5). All these descriptive and prescriptive qualities suggest that perceptions of control in video games depend largely on genre analysis.

In many respects, perceptions of control are linked to what a specific video game genre allows as certain genres contain more choices for the gamer. According to Earnest Adams, "A genre is a category of games characterized by a particular set of challenges regardless of setting or game-world content" (70). Much like film, television, or print-based literature, video game genres are usually classified by similar features. However, video game genres are also different from traditional media. Mark J. Wolf notes, "Video game genre study differs from literary or film genre study due to the direct and active (in a physical as well as mental sense) participation of the audience. In some ways, player participation is arguably the central element used in describing and classifying video games, moreso even than iconography" (259). While the images or tropes in a video game are important to classifying its genre, equally important are the gameplay mechanics that govern interactivity. For example, role-playing games (RPGs) "allow the player to take on the role of a hero on a quest to right a wrong or achieve a great destiny. These games are typically played from a graphical third-person perspective, as if looking down

on the people represented in the game" (Sellers 12). Common features in all RPGs include the ability to level up, exploring a unique video game world, meeting interesting non-playable characters (NPCs), and advancing a story. Traditional literary genre tropes for RPGs include high fantasy, science-fiction, steampunk, and more. However, RPGs are also defined by their game mechanics. For example, most Japanese RPGs, such as *Final Fantasy* or *Dragon Quest*, are turn-based and feature the third-person perspective (these seem to be the types of games that Sellers refers to). Many Japanese RPGs also have tight narratives. On the other hand, some Western RPGs like Bethesda's *Skyrim* can be first-person and focus on a primary protagonist rather than a team of companions. Further, combat in Western RPGs tends to be live-action in that gamers do not have to wait their turn to attack. RPGs encompass just one video game genre as others include racing simulators, fighting games, visual novels (that rely predominately on storytelling), action adventure games, and more.

It is helpful to include genres in video game discourse because not all games can be used for every desirable purpose. In particular, Katherine Isbister makes note of this dilemma in *How Games Move Us*:

> Yet we still talk about games as if they're all the same. We talk about how games reenergize education, without having a nuanced conversation about which games and why. We worry about the impact of violent games on young people, without necessarily being able to distinguish for ourselves differences among various conflict and weapons-based games in the way we could compare, say, an Arnold Schwarzenegger movie to *A Clockwork Orange* to a Bugs Bunny cartoon. (Locations 275-279)

To Isbister's point, one of the struggles of solely analyzing story elements or game mechanics is that the general public and perhaps even game scholars might start to lump them all together

when most have differing features. To suggest that a game like *Chrono Trigger* shares similarities with *Contra* because both involve space aliens as primary antagonists might be just as much of a stretch as comparing a Schwarzenegger movie to a Bugs Bunny cartoon. Two might be games and two might be shown on cable television, but each possesses qualities that might be more appropriate for certain discourses over others. Like negative and positive freedom, genre will play a significant role in the play study highlighted in the fourth and fifth chapters. Importantly, certain genres, such as sandbox games, are heavily influenced by video game modifications.

Video Game Modifications

"If mods are fan labor that's sort of designed to increase the longevity of a project, then I think it's interesting that fans are addressing needs that players actually have. I mean, who else would know what players want than, like, other players?" – Participant 22-M

Research on video game mods is somewhat scant given the impact video games have had on scholarly pursuits. Nevertheless, scholars have highlighted an often-uneasy relationship between a video game corporation and its modding community. The classic 1962 computer game *Spacewar!* is considered one of the first hacks, but the first mod was 1983's *Castle Smurfenstein*, which replaced all evidence of Nazis in *Castle Wolfenstein* with Smurfs.[2] Modding eventually became integral to such games as id Software's *Doom* and *Quake*, and even Valve Corporation's GoldSrc game engine (which was a modified version of *Quake*'s engine). Economically, mods

[2] See https://www.evl.uic.edu/aej/smurf.html.

are free labor for the corporation. Hector Postigo notes, “Video-game hobbyists are uniquely positioned to have their work incorporated into the commercial production endeavours because close ties already exist between fans and companies developing games” (598). The modding community and video game corporations are in a relationship that predominately aids the latter as mods extend the shelf lives and profit margins for their games. Economically and legally, the current relationship between video game companies and the modding community is symbiotic wherein benefits and threats to either party determine when and how a company might take legal action against mods or modders (Kretzschmar and Stanfill 6).

At present, the practice of video game modding allows gamers and programming enthusiasts to alter a video game for various reasons. Expanding on the discourse of video game modifications, Alexander Unger presents a unique typology of mods based on four distinct classifications in “Modding As a Part of Gaming Culture.” Basic or simple mods are classified as “mutators/tweaks,” which “can be attachments that do not influence the game play and its mechanism at all, but only have an ‘aesthetic’ effect, like changing the weather conditions or implementing the option to listen to your own mp3 collection while playing” (Unger 518). Unger’s second classification of mods are “add-ons,” which might be “new maps, new units, new skins, and so on. The original game mechanism and game setting are more or less untouched or just slightly modified or extended” (518). These mods are more complex than mutators/tweaks. For example, modifying the player’s avatar to bear a striking resemblance to Hulk Hogan while fighting the behemoth Deathclaws designed as Macho Man Randy Savage in *Fallout 4* changes the tone of the game since both wrestling legends have no reason to be in the game, but the game mechanics will largely remain unscathed. However, Unger’s third and fourth classifications change the game significantly. Unger defines the third component of the typology

as “mods,” which might “try to establish a new fraction, setting, or narration. In this sense, mods change the original game, its narration, rules, and mechanism in a significant way, but not as much as total conversions” (518). An example to accommodate Unger’s definition would be “Alternate Start: Live Another Life” by modder Arthmoor. When this mod is activated in Bethesda’s *Skyrim*, the gamer has the option to bypass the main narrative altogether by playing as a different character in a randomized region of the world map. The player could become the Dragonborn (the game’s hero) later by following certain in-game instructions, but the mod provides gamers with the opportunity to explore the already huge world of *Skyrim* in exciting new ways.

These mods link directly to Unger’s fourth term, “total conversions.” All other forms of mods can be seen in total conversions, but this ultimate procedure of video game modding “needs to invent a completely new game or to modify the rule system, the narration, and so on in a way such that it feels like playing a new game. This often includes a complete replacement of the visual/audible game content as well as major changes in the game mechanics and the narrative” (518). While Unger’s “mods” are capable of altering or breathing new life into a particular video game title, a total conversion mod is its own revolutionary product. They are designed by individuals who probably will never receive financial consideration for their creations, even if a potential goal for certain modders is to showcase their programming skills in an attempt to work for a video game company (Postigo 310). These informal job applications or enthusiasm for the modding craft are usually the only real rewards for modders as mods are currently considered fair use; modders generally cannot receive monetary compensation for altering extant intellectual property. *The Harvard Law Review* concludes in “Spare the Mod: In Support of Total-Conversation Modified Video Games” that allowing “property rights to

modders for total conversions could shift the innovation paradigm of the enormous gaming industry, stimulating user creativity and broadening the digital canon" (810). Although encouraging, such a paradigm shift has not yet come to fruition as mods can be encouraged or dismissed depending on how a corporation views them; some companies view mods favorably while others have threatened legal action against modders.

Literature on why modders mod or how mods impact player experience or perceptions of control is equally infrequent as mod legality or modding motivations. Nathaniel Poor discovered in "Computer Game Modders' Motivations and Sense of Community: A Mixed-Methods Approach" reasons include fostering a sense of community, improving the game, and assisting others (1254-1255). Chapter Three will also list some recent exceptions that suggest some modders are presently trying to commodify their mods that impact player perceptions of control. There is some justification for the impact of mods on player experience via ludology, which emphasizes that 1) video games have different characteristics than other texts and 2) they have unique rule systems. The practice of video game modding allows gamers and programming enthusiasts to alter a video game for various reasons. Katie Salen (who now writes as Katie Salen Tekinbaş) and Eric Zimmerman describe three such strategies in *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* that "call attention to the borders of the magic circle by creating friction between existing and alternative versions of the game" (559). Mods might be "alterations" "that rework existing forms of representation or interaction" (560). Under this classification, a video game mod might replace uber-masculine characters with outlandish skins, thus creating friction between what the game is supposed to represent and what the gamer has decided to alter (Salen and Zimmerman 560). These alterations include the popular Macho Man dragon and deathclaw skins in Bethesda's *Skyrim* and *Fallout 4* respectively, but Gonzalo Frasca alludes to such

alterations in his 2003 article "Simulation Versus Narrative: Introduction to Ludology" in which he addresses the use of Israeli and Palestinian modded skins in *Quake*, which makes this game different on an ideological level (232). Although modifying the skins of characters is considered a minor adjustment in terms of game design, such a controversial change suddenly introduces real world global politics that id Software surely wanted no part in.

This example falls under Salen and Zimmerman's second strategy of "juxtaposition." As the name suggest, this strategy pairs two or more concepts together that otherwise might have no business operating within the same space. As a result, juxtaposed "resistant meanings emerge through the expressive pairing of unlikely elements" (Salen and Zimmerman 561). Of course, altered and juxtaposed video game mods can, at times, result in the creation of something unique. The third modding strategy is "reinvention," which often results in the creation of an entirely new video game from an extant model, thus "modifying the core structures of a game, reshaping them from the inside out" (563). This modding strategy is often capable of generating substantial buzz as the result is usually a total conversion mod. One famous example is the renowned first-person shooter *Counter-Strike*, which was a mod of the equally-popular video game *Half-Life*. *Counter-Strike* was a successful first-person shooter that replaced skins in *Half-Life* with terrorists and counter-terrorist units based on real special forces units. As a mod, "*Counter-Strike* transformed the original game on numerous levels, creating a game experience wholly its own," and was even purchased by Valve shortly after its release (developers of the GoldSrc game engine used in *Half-Life*) (Salen and Zimmerman 564). Fittingly, Valve (now the conglomerate behind the game streaming service Steam), has played a role in other subsequent popular video game mods, including the multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) title *Defense of the Ancients* (*DOTA*) based on *Blizzard's Warcraft III*, and *The Stanley Parable*. *DOTA* requires multiple

users to play as they compete to take down the "Ancients" in the game while protecting their own bases and *The Stanley Parable* is a walking simulator about an employee named Stanley who is rebuked by the game's narrator if he veers off the story's primary narrative created by the narrator.

Recall that Dennett defines control as, "A controls B if and only if the relation between A and B is such that A can drive B into whichever of B's normal range of states A wants B to be in" (57). If "A" represents the gamer and "B" denotes the game, a mod could be viewed as a mechanism for the gamer to nudge the game into certain states. Mods serve two important functions in terms of perceptions of control. First, they expand narrative, gameplay, and aesthetic choices in game design as examples include (but are not limited to) new story quests, improved combat systems, graphical adjustments, and customizable armor that do not appear in the original "vanilla" version of the game—a vanilla game is one that is relatively ordinary.[3] Second, mods appear to grant the gamer more control than what might have originally been offered since most mods are, by definition, created by fans. Mods cannot be created by the producers who developed the corresponding games because then they would be considered official downloadable content (DLC). For some sandbox games like Bethesda's *Skyrim*, gamers can conveniently use a mod managing system to decide which mods they will or will not use for each playthrough, granting them some semblance of actual control over content in their interactive experience. This amount of power might also influence immersion in the virtual world for as stated in Don Merritt's research on Blizzard's *Word of Warcraft*, "These data suggest that addon users with disabilities have a deeper experience with the game than players with disabilities who

[3] See http://whatis.techtarget.com/definition/vanilla.

do not take advantage of addons. This means that Blizzard has created an environment capable of facilitating users with disabilities" (122).

Despite these positive attributes of video game mods, they are also controversial as they can be scrutinized for reasons that might include intellectual property violations, unfair labor practices between corporations and gamers, online multiplayer cheating, and even sociocultural concerns. Some mods have also come under fire for their racist subject matter.[4] However, those concerns will have to be addressed at length by other scholars or future research (see Kretzschmar and Stanfill) as the current study is most interested in what mods might reveal about perceptions of control in gamers playing a sandbox video game.

Experimental Philosophy Research

Although this dissertation is predominately affixed to game studies, it also participates in the field of experimental philosophy. Experimental philosophers believe "that a critical method for figuring out how human beings think is to go out and actually run systematic empirical studies. Hence, experimental philosophers proceed by conducting experimental investigations of the psychological processes underlying people's intuitions about central philosophical issues" (Knobe and Nichols 3). Experimental philosophy research is generally quantitative by design and emphasizes the analysis of folk intuitions, or viewpoints of lay individuals who traditionally do not have specialized philosophy backgrounds. The goal of such experimental philosophy studies is to approach broad concepts like determinism, compatibilism, and free will from ordinary

[4] See https://kotaku.com/the-struggle-over-gamers-who-use-mods-to-create-racist-1826606138.

individuals who can still contribute insightful dialogue as they are tasked with defining their own experiences.

While viewpoints of the "folk" are essential to this game studies dissertation, an outline of experimental philosophy history reveals that the closest many studies get to discussing perceptions of control is by probing beliefs of free will. It is difficult (or impossible) to explore free will in games in the same manner as the physical world, but at the very least, some experimental philosophy studies show there is evidence to suggest a difference exists between asking if humans have free will (the philosophical question linked to actual control) and if humans believe they have free will (the psychological question associated with perceived control). For example, Nahmias et al. report in "The Phenomenology of Free Will" that their research "supports the compatibilist description of the phenomenology more than the libertarian description, though not, of course, decisively" (177-178). Drawing on the works of other researchers, Nahmias et al. asked 96 undergraduate students to choose between a compatibilist and libertarian option in a thought experiment: "62% offered the 'compatibilist response' (B); 35% offered the 'libertarian response' (A); and 3% answered 'neither'" (174-175). Research also shows that participants believe that they are in control of their actions as agents. Nahmias and his colleagues would further explore experimental philosophy in the 2005 study "Surveying Freedom: Folk Intuitions about Free Will and Moral Responsibility" by addressing such themes as determinism, indeterminism, and compatibilism. Although the number of participants involved was not readily available, Nahmias et al. applied a moral component to folk intuitions into philosophical thought experiments and suggest that "agents act of their own free will and are morally responsible for their actions" (561). This research suggests that when individuals are presented with a scenario that might result in blaming the agent (i.e. robbing a bank) the agent

could have done otherwise, while an action deemed worthy of praise (i.e. saving a child) could not have done otherwise (568). Despite inconclusive data, the researchers still maintain that indeterminists rather than compatibilists need to provide refuting evidence because "If incompatibilists claim that compatibilism is a 'wretched subterfuge,' a radical revision of commonsense beliefs, then we recommend that some empirical evidence should be offered to back up this claim" (572).

Additional evidence reveals that specific demographics, such as young adults, support free will. Rakos et al. produced a philosophical study of their own in 2008 titled "Belief in Free Will: Measurement and Conceptualization Innovations." The researchers provide a brief literature review on free will that predominately emphasizes free will does not exist (21). One notable proponent of this view was the American behaviorist B.F. Skinner, who believed that free will "masks the reality of determinism by offering a homunculus as a comforting pseudo-explanation for behavior" (21). If true, such a statement would be damning to the concept of free will that many agents assume they possess. Additionally, such a proclamation also reveals just how ubiquitous the concept of free will has become since it is an integral fixture to many psychological and behavioral studies. Ultimately, Rakos et al. measured belief in free will from two sources: the first was a high school with 76 participants and the second was a university with 85 participants (26). The researchers note that their participants were largely white, which disallowed "comparisons among racial or ethnic groups," a critique that many would certainly find relevant (26). Nevertheless, Rakos et al. discovered that both age groups believed in free will, and their "data reported in this investigation support the common assumption that humans believe they are the authors of their actions" (33).

Some experimental philosophy studies, while still quantitative, consider participants' own definitions of concepts like free will. Monroe and Malle explored the issue of free will and folk intuition by having 180 participants define the concept in their own words (214). These responses were then coded in a manner that suggests free will has "three major categories: (a) decision or choice; (b) following one's desires; and (c) overcoming (internal or external) constraints" (214). Considering their responses towards free will, the participants were then invited to accept or reject a common neurological assertion that free will is an illusion because behavior is controlled by neural impulses (217). In the study, "85 (49%) rejected the neuroscientists' claim that free will was an illusion; 46 (26%) accepted the claim, and 44 (25%) participants wavered between accepting and rejecting," revealing potential folk beliefs in free will, determinism, and even compatibilism (218). Although this is potentially great news for proponents of free will, it should be noted that like other experimental philosophy studies, the way questions or prompts are phrased can influence participant responses. For example, many individuals outright reject determinism when the term is uttered, so future research might have to be more creative in framing the philosophy (222).

Other experimental philosophy research shows that folk intuitions of compatibilist moral responsibility are fragmented. Conducting research on a topic similar to Nahmias et al.'s "Surveying Freedom: Folk Intuitions about Free Will and Moral Responsibility," Miller and Feltz address free will and moral culpability from the perspective of compatibilist Harry Frankfurt's refute of the Principle of Alternate Possibilities (PAP), which posits that an agent is morally responsible for an action if measures are in place that allowed them to do otherwise (402). Such philosophical Frankfurt Cases generally call for the suspension of disbelief because a

common characteristic is that an omnipotent individual has somehow managed to install a neuro device into an agent's brain that is activated if the agent so much as thinks about choosing an option that the all-powerful presence does not want. The central component of any of these cases is whether the agent is responsible for their actions or the consequences that follow. Miller and Feltz presented a similar case to 103 undergraduates at Florida State University (405). Miller and Feltz's research indicates that even with thought experiments that involve outlandish scenarios featuring mind control, "many people do indeed have the intuition that agents in [Frankfurt Style Cases] are morally responsible" (410). That said, their research also highlights a prevailing problem of what might happen if the intuitions of the common folk are prioritized, which is the possibility that participants might misunderstand the hypothetical situation. For example, even if such an experiment might explicitly state that no alternates are possible, participants might proclaim that agents are morally culpable for their actions due to their own imaginative inferences that alternatives somehow persist (412).

Although video game philosophy is a popular research field, experimental video game philosophy is presently nonexistent. This is perhaps due to the difficulty of assessing or even explaining free will in video games. The problem with exploring free will in video games is that no game can produce radical free will since they have been programmed in advance by a developer or team. However, a complete deterministic reading of agency in video games is restrictive due to the interactive nature of the medium. Ultimately, exploring free will in video games will usually lead to similar conclusions. Since no video game can provide radical free will yet also require the inputs from the gamer to function, it is best to explore agency using control,

negative freedom, and positive freedom. Qualitative analysis provides an opportunity to accomplish this task.

Background of Qualitative Analysis

If control is the underlying mechanism for agency through, for example, positive and negative constructions of freedom, it is an intriguing concept to explore in game studies. This dissertation presents two opportunities to incorporate a quality like control into philosophy and game studies. First, some experimental philosophers have called for the inclusion of more forms of qualitative analysis in the field because qualitative data provides the researcher with information that is not readily available in quantitative studies. This reliance on quantitative analysis is curious in a traditionally humanities field such as philosophy since the majority of disciplines in the humanities are driven by qualitative analysis. Perhaps seeing this dilemma, James Andow argues that qualitative tools might allow for participants to "think and talk about philosophically interesting phenomena for themselves"; "give [the researcher] much deeper insight"; and "respond in their own words" (1131). While this puts faith in participants to display responsibility and ownership for their experiences, this sense of trust is common in qualitative experimental philosophy. This argument is suggested by Eddy Nahmias et al. in "The Phenomenology of Free Will," who state that "the best idea may be to trust subjects to be the experts on their own experiences" (176). The inclusion of qualitative data in philosophy should produce insightful findings, which might only be revealed through careful reflection among the participants. Andow states that "the motivations behind experimental philosophy and typical reasons for thinking the data it provides can make a philosophical contribution would in no way

justify limiting experimental philosophy to the investigation of intuitive thought" (1134). In other words, by incorporating qualitative studies, experimental philosophy does not limit itself to intuition, thereby allowing rational thought to promote its appeal and viability as a research field.

Second, qualitative analysis invites opportunities to pair philosophy with other disciplines; interdisciplinary studies themselves are quite fledgling in experimental philosophy. In line with Andow's assumptions that qualitative analysis can make contributions to experimental philosophy, Womack and Mulvaney-Day pair the emerging field with feminist bioethics and state, "Use of expanded methods is particularly relevant for feminist bioethics, which strives to include the values and experiences of both practitioners with hands-on tacit knowledge as well as the disenfranchised for whom public health programs are often designed" (127). With the assistance of qualitative data, researchers and philosophers might be granted "the opportunity to inform the landscape of moral reasoning and the potential to reinforce this epistemic shift in other areas of inquiry as well" (Womack and Mulvaney-Day 129). Such an opportunity also applies to game studies. I must concede that the media—especially narratives—all humans consume for work, entertainment, or daily living have many deterministic qualities. For example, any show, series, book, or movie will unfold until it reaches its predetermined conclusion. However, interactive media like video games have given legitimacy to compatibilism. Ultimately, how should a gamer observe their role in a deterministic virtual world? Gamers must accept that these digital worlds have been programmed in advance. Therefore, instead of measuring free will in video games, measuring a singular aspect of agency like perceived control is much more practical.

This study provides a unique opportunity to investigate what role, if any, modifications play in perceptions of control in sandbox video games. No extant literature asks participants how they feel about their level of control in sandbox video games after playing with mods. If mods represent another level of perceived interactivity in video games, will narrative mods prove to be a deciding factor on a gamer's perception of immersion and enjoyment? Further, to what extent will gamers assess their perceptions of control in a virtual world, whether unmodded or modded? Would findings allow us to better understand game design as well as philosophy in the world? Before I could explore these questions, I had to find a game with an established fanbase and modding history.

Enter Bethesda's *Skyrim*

To measure the impacts modifications might have on a gamer's experience as well as how gamers address philosophical concepts in video games, a game with an established modifications history had to be incorporated into the study. The game also had to be well-known. Rosa Mikeal Martey et al. make note of this in "Measuring Game Engagement: Multiple Methods and Construct Complexity" and suggest future research might benefit from experimenting on a blockbuster video game since their experiment was conducted on a self-made educational game (541). Further, Youngkyun Baek and Achraf Touati used the popular sandbox game *Minecraft* to measure perceptions of intrinsic motivation and discovered that "players who had more positive attitudes toward a game were more intrinsically motivated to play" (354). The chosen video game for this play study was Bethesda's popular sandbox role-playing game *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011). There is a lot to do in *Skyrim*, but all video games are

programmed in advance by a team of developers. Philosophically speaking, this calls into question just how much choice gamers have in these environments since they are interacting within a space that allows and prohibits certain actions. In fact, *Skyrim* begins with very little interaction at all. As soon as *Skyrim* loads, the gamer discovers that they are on a wagon set for the town of Helgen. The gamer can adjust their avatar's gaze while in the wagon (albeit with severe limitations), but this is an example of a cinematic cutscene that takes control away from the gamer by inhibiting interaction. Due to undisclosed circumstances, the gamer's character is set to be executed alongside Ulfric Stormcloak, who has killed a powerful ruler from the northern fortress of Solitude. Only after this sequence is the gamer allowed to create their protagonist. Just as the character is about to be executed, the ancient dragon Alduin wreaks havoc on Helgen, allowing the character to escape. Once this scripted event is over, the gamer can explore *Skyrim* at their leisure as they discover their protagonist is the legendary hero known as the Dragonborn, or a powerful mortal who possesses the strength of dragons.

The main narrative of *Skyrim* is itself somewhat formulaic because it has been influenced by previous high fantasy video games and literature, including *Beowulf*, Norse mythology, *Lord of the Rings*, and *Game of Thrones*. However, what fans of role-playing games find appealing about *Skyrim* is how massive the world appears as each new marker on the map requires the gamer to walk to it by foot to discover it. Additionally, even though the main narrative is cliché, the plethora of side quests that the gamer can seek creates personalized gaming experiences based on the predilections of gamers. For example, gamers can spend the game spelunking in caves and crypts to find hidden treasures. Other gamers may wish to join guilds that provide the gamer with new skills and attributes for their on-screen avatar. Additional side quests allow the gamer to pick allegiances, notably the Empire who wishes to preserve the status quo in Skyrim,

or the Stormcloaks who desire to exile all ethnicities except for the Nords. Gamers will encounter intriguing characters, places, and will ultimately have to fight a dragon or two that decides to attack the gamer's avatar.

Skyrim provides a unique opportunity to explore gamer perceptions of control in video games. After several hours, what were once considered fun activities (i.e. blacksmithing, exploring, fighting, bartering with merchants, etc.) could eventually become boring as gamers are asked to repeat them ad nauseum. Video games have life cycles, and many lose popularity months after their release. By contrast, a game like *Skyrim* remains culturally significant because thousands of modifications are available for download from platforms like Bethesda.net, Nexus Mods, and Steam. These mods can be simple changes, like adjusting the weather in *Skyrim*, or they can produce a huge addition to the game, such as an entirely new location for gamers to visit.

Mods currently represent another level of gamer agency in terms of philosophical perceptions of control that scholars should explore. This is because user-generated mods vastly increase narrative, aesthetic, and gameplay choices that were not available in the basic vanilla version when the game was released. On its own, *Skyrim* is a massive game that requires hundreds of hours to complete the main quest as well as all side quests. Yet after a while, all repetitive actions—such as blacksmithing, exploring, bartering, and leveling up to name a few actions—become increasingly mundane and dissimilar. Vanilla sandbox games are often initially ambitious, but they tend to lose their immersive power once gamers become bored with a game that exhausts any novel features it previously possessed. However, like its name implies, a vanilla sandbox video game is a suitable base for new flavors, additions, and special features

(mods). Although there are thousands of mods in existence in *Skyrim*, I isolated three popular narrative mods for the qualitative play study outlined below.

As previously explained by Alexander Unger, mods could be classified as tweaks, add-ons, "mods," and total conversions. Only one type will be addressed in this play study: narrative add-ons. These particular mods might include "new maps, new units, new skins, and so on. The original game mechanism and game setting are more or less untouched or just slightly modified or extended" (Unger 518). Narratively speaking, the mods that were incorporated into this study were two modded companions (NPCs the gamer can recruit to assist with battles) mods named Sofia and Inigo, and a massive mod titled "Interesting NPCs." Sofia was created by Nexus users John Jarvis and Christine Slagman, and she can be found in the stables just outside the city of Whiterun. Her dialogue options exceed those of existing companions in *Skyrim* as she routinely provides commentary about locations and quests. According to her Nexus home page, Sofia has been downloaded more than 474,000 times. Inigo is another unique character mod created by Nexus user Smartbluecat (Gary Hesketh). He is a khajit (*Skyrim*'s resident cat race) who insists that he knows the main character as they worked together on a mission before Inigo (while high on a drug called Skooma) attempted to kill the main character for a greater reward. Like Sofia, Inigo provides new commentary on *Skyrim*, its towns, and quests. The Inigo mod has been downloaded more than 900,000 times with an additional 370,000 downloads for *Skyrim Special Edition*. The third mod, "Interesting NPCs," was developed by Nexus user Kris Takahashi, who claims that they had no previous modding experience before devising the massive add-on. "Interesting NPCs" boasts more than 250 voiced NPCs, dozens of quests, and thousands of lines of dialogue not available in the original game. Unlike the previous two mods, these new characters can be encountered throughout the world map. Takahashi's mod has been downloaded

a staggering 3.6 million times. All three narrative add-ons were chosen because of their popularity, total downloads, and endorsements on Nexus, and they were downloaded using the Nexus Mod Manager.

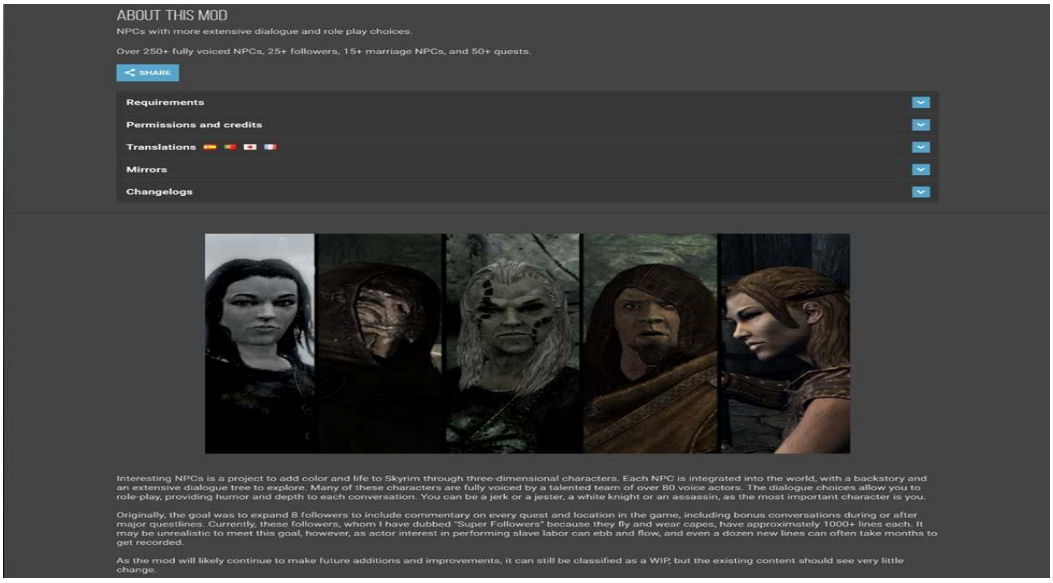

Figure 2. "Interesting NPCs" via Nexus Mod Manager.

Mods are generally a response to a feature or limitation in the base game, and these chosen narrative add-ons are no different. Due to game world and story constraints, mods allow gamers to construct a new or different sense of purpose once the original experience stagnates. For example, games like *Minecraft* or *The Sims* do not impose a narrative and call on the gamer to construct their own story, revealing that designers often take shortcuts that modders will eventually address. Since open world games are designed to be played for considerable lengths of time, the fact that modders create and gamers download narrative mods in *Skyrim* is in part a reflection of how standard or lackluster the original story can be in a base game after multiple playthroughs. As such, some mods address missing storytelling components that certain fans might eventually desire.

The play study mods address spaces for storytelling that the base game did not initially provide. For example, some gamers download Sofia for her humor and wit, but the fact that her appearance was modeled using a body scaler that manipulates body proportions is an indication that she is a response to the lack of perceived fanservice in the game (a common critique among male participants in my play study who found her). Many of her unique dialogue options also involve sexual innuendo. As such, it is probable that a gamer who willingly incorporates Sofia into their video game wants to add a sexual dimension to their story. Conversely, Inigo is not sexualized, but is a response to the fact that many NPCs or companions in *Skyrim* are similar to each other and have very little exposition. His thousands of lines of dialogue and unique combat acumen fill the desire to have a companion that could be considered an improvement over what the base game provides. Finally, "Interesting NPCs" could be a response to the entire world of *Skyrim*. For such a giant and immersive world, the NPCs in particular are voiced by the same voice actors. Additionally, NPCs generally repeat dialogue. This mod addresses both issues by introducing new voices and dialogue that breathe new life into the game. In fact, a common critique is that some of these new NPCs are so talkative that some gamers are not prepared for the depth of certain conversations.

Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative play study was to assess what role mods play in gamer perceptions of control, what these views may say about game design techniques, and what gamers suggest about control in physical and digital environments. The first two questions are situated in game studies while the third is rooted in philosophical and psychological research.

Ultimately, experimental philosophy was suggested in this dissertation because there is reason to believe the field can benefit from qualitative analysis as stated earlier. Further, while control is integral to such concepts as flow, transportation, and immersion, research on these principles is quantitative, and the measurement tools are as well. I believe we need to start asking gamers for their definitions of control in games if we are going to start asking new questions about agency in game design. At present, it is difficult with quantitative instruments, or valuable information is left off the table. For these reasons, assessing control through a self-made instrument was necessary.

Although this dissertation is situated in game studies with a link to experimental philosophy, the research design was intended to be largely exploratory rather than conclusive. Exploratory research is useful for topics that have not gained much attention. These studies can be very specific with a specific set of questions, or they can be broad in order to pave the way for future research (Vogt, Gardner, and Haeffele 144). In my play study, the questions were specific, but I did not know what sort of answers I would receive during the interviews. That is, while I suspected (and discovered) that mods would make an impact, it was not until I listened to participants that their statements, opinions, and beliefs became clear (see Chapter Four). Additionally, a pattern for answering the first two research questions emerged after three rounds of data analysis. Exploratory research design is related to grounded theory research in that both are descriptive of a phenomenon that has not been explored extensively. While qualitative research of mods fits this definition, the purpose of grounded theory is to produce a theory (Birks and Mills 18). Ultimately, I "[exploited] the value of grounded theory methods in more diverse research designs" to produce answers for my research questions (Birks and Mills 31). The flexibility of qualitative exploratory research allowed me to take the initial steps to include

gamers in a framework that gave them an opportunity to interpret perceptions of control in games using their own words. This study laid the groundwork for questions that have not been asked in academic gaming circles, and laying this groundwork could lead to new studies on mods and game design.

The *Skyrim* play study was conducted from June 19th to July 17th, 2018. 46 participants completed the initial intake questionnaire. Of those 46, 27 participants followed through with the second step of scheduling a time to play the game and were ultimately recruited for the play study. Fifteen of the participants identified as male and twelve identified as female. In qualitative studies, it is typical to include inclusion criteria so that participants are appropriate for the research (Quartaroli and Lapan 45). Only one inclusionary criterion was required for this play study, which was that all participants had to identify as gamers.[5]

All 27 participants identified as gamers, but their gaming backgrounds were diverse as evidenced by an eclectic assortment of genres and video game brands mentioned throughout the interviews. For example, fourteen had substantial experience with *Skyrim* in the past while the remaining thirteen had no or very minimal experience with the game. Further, their educational backgrounds were equally diverse as some participants were undergraduates, some completed an undergraduate degree, some were currently attending graduate school, and some even finished graduate school.

After arriving for their scheduled appointments, participants were notified that they would be playing either a modded or unmodded version of Bethesda's sandbox role-playing game for one hour. The modded version contained the "Sofia," "Inigo," and "Interesting NPCs"

[5] This study took place in the Games Research Lab at the University of Central Florida. It was advertised to English and digital media students through e-mails and flyers at Colbourn Hall, the School of Visual Arts and Design, and the Orlando Tech Center where the Games Research Lab is located.

mods. Of the 27 participants, fourteen were asked to play the modded version of the game while thirteen were asked to play the unmodded version (participants will be defined as Participant Number- U/M to reference which version they played). Regardless of the game version, each participant started in the town of Riverwood outside Whiterun, one of the eight main cities. Participants were notified that the first main quests (the tutorial that follows fleeing Helgen and retrieving the Dragonstone from Bleak Falls Barrow) had been completed for them in the interest of time. Participants were also notified that I would be in the room with them making observations on their playthroughs. A gaming desktop computer was used to run the game and participants played with an Xbox controller.

Following one hour of play, each participant was asked a series of open-ended questions about their experience playing the game. Due to the initial set-up of the play study, one hour of gameplay, and the post-game interview, participants were scheduled for approximately 90-100 minutes. They were compensated with a $10 Amazon gift card courtesy of a Texts and Technology Dissertation Award. The play study as well as the compensation were approved by the University of Central Florida's Institutional Review Board (IRB) office.

My hypothesis was that participants who play the modded version of *Skyrim* would have greater personal perceived control of their gaming experience than participants who played the factory standard version of the game. This hypothesis was proven true for those gamers who had experience with the game, but the baseline participants (those who did not have any experience with *Skyrim*) expressed that sandbox games are perceived to provoke greater perceptions of control than other genres. Ultimately, mods made a difference, as evidenced by such factors as enjoyment, engagement, interest, immersion, and agency in digital worlds. All data collected was qualitative and such findings could potentially impact the future of mods. Womack and

Mulvaney-Day suggest "by allowing people the power to frame scenarios themselves and identify which features are salient for their particular judgments, philosophy genuinely incorporates the experiences of individuals into a coherent, complex, and multifaceted account of important philosophical concepts" (114). While there have been calls to incorporate more qualitative studies into experimental philosophy, the field is still dominated by quantitative analysis. Qualitative data is more descriptive and varied, as each participant provided unique answers for the research questions, including the impact mods have on user experience, the link between perceptions of control and genres, and understanding control in both physical and digital environments. There is reason to believe that including such research into experimental philosophy could be a great way to test the philosophical assumptions of everyday individuals, and the fifth question asked in each participant's interview supports this claim. Although quantitative studies could provide insight into the rapid-fire intuitions of individuals, qualitative analysis in my play study offered deeper insight into why individuals believe in certain philosophical or game design concepts. Below are the observation and interview protocols that were used to evaluate each participant's responses.

In-Game Observations

According to Creswell, observation notes "can be useful information for developing a chronology of the ways the activities unfolded during the […] session" (138). Observations were used in this manner to keep track of events or milestones that were accomplished over each participant's playthrough. For example, eighteen participants (eight unmodded and ten modded) advanced the main narrative beyond the first dragon fight. This meant that each participant eventually journeyed to Whiterun, met the jarl (ruler), gave the Dragonstone to his personal

mage, Farengar Secret-Fire, and journeyed to the Western Watchtower to fight the dragon. One experienced participant, Participant 9-U, who played the unmodded version commented on this dragon fight, "That's why you buy the game." Even though several participants explored various destinations at their leisure, the dragon fight was the most common pattern. Observations also allowed me to keep track of comments made during each playthrough that were interesting as well as provided opportunities for later reflection. In addition to chronicling each participant's playthrough, the observations provided a method for me to support or call into question certain interview responses. Ultimately, these secondary observation notes supplemented the post-game interviews as they allowed me to confirm data or note inconsistencies between each gamer's playthrough and their interview.

Participant Interviews

Interviews are one of the most popular ways to collect data in qualitative research. There are several qualitative methods, but individual interviews allowed me to provide context for my data. These interviews allowed me to focus on the specific mods in the play study as well as the participants' experiences with mods. I used this data to situate user experience with mods in relationship to *Skyrim*, their hour-long playthroughs, and their perceptions of control in the game. Although a method like data-mining keywords in forums is an interesting approach (and will be useful for future research), this current knowledge is so specific to the dissertation that it might be difficult to find. In other words, this play study provides a foundation or point of reference for such comparative data-mining in future studies. All participants were asked six primary questions in a semi-structured interview designed using Creswell's interview protocol, which suggests beginning with questions that address the main idea and then narrow to allow the

participant to open up (133). Follow-ups were included as necessary if a participant needed to clarify or elaborate on their responses. However, the skeletal structure was the same for every interview:

> "Welcome. Thank you for participating in this experiment. The results of this interview will be incorporated into my dissertation. The purpose of this study is to see whether and how video game modifications (mods) change a gamer's experience in a game like Bethesda's *Skyrim*. Mods can be used to alter the aesthetic, narrative, and gameplay features of a video game. At the core of this study will be to see if one kind of group of narrative mods called "add-ons" enhance a gamer's experience. Upon the completion of this study, the researcher hopes to gain a better understanding of how mods change the experience of digital video game worlds."

1. You are here because you play video games. I do, too. Do you feel like you're in control of your actions in video games? Please explain.
2. Three types of choices that people talk about in video games are narrative, gameplay, and aesthetic choices. Can you think of some narrative choices in video games that you thought were significant? What were they?
3. Now let's talk specifically about *Skyrim*. What was it like playing this version just now?
4. I noticed that you spent your hour of playtime doing *insert participant-specific trait here*. What made you want to do those activities in the *modded/unmodded* game? (The phrasing of this question depended on each playthrough.)
5. How would you say games compare to everyday life in terms of having control over situations or outcomes?
6. Do you have any other comments?

All interviews were audio-recorded with a Blue Yeti microphone and were transcribed by the researcher. Each participant was given a study number for the purpose of confidentiality. Questions 1 and 2 allowed each participant to explain how they personally perceive control in video games. In these questions, it was predominately revealed that perceptions of control are linked to video game genres, which will be further explored in Chapters Three and Five. Questions 3 and 4 dealt explicitly with playthroughs of *Skyrim* for the play study. These questions allowed participants to discuss their hour of playtime in their own words with either the modded or unmodded version of the game. Question 4 was adjusted during the observation to account for something unique that each participant did in their playthrough. For example, Participants 2-M 4-M 6-M 8-M, 10-M, 12-M, 20-M, 22-M, 24-M, 26-M, and 27-M all encountered or attempted to encounter at least one mod, and the question was modified to probe this decision.[6] These questions provided evidence for mods and perceptions of control within the game, and it was primarily in these questions that participants who experienced the mods discussed how they impacted their experiences. These two questions are associated with Chapters Three and Four. Question 5 asked the participants to explain how control in everyday life compares to video games. This question allowed for everyone to analyze concepts of agency and control in their own words and had the most to do with experimental philosophy as the discipline probes the assumptions of ordinary "folk." Further, participants appeared to describe positive and negative perceptions of freedom discussed earlier, which will be addressed once again in Chapter Two. The final question allowed the participants to discuss anything that might have been missed in the study, including additional thoughts on the gaming experience,

[6] For example, for Participant 27-M, the question became, "So I noticed that you recruited both Sofia and Inigo in your hour of playtime. What made you want to do that activity in this modded version of the game?"

modifications, and even video game agency. As this was the most open-ended question, responses ranged from no new information; comments about how old the game is now (experienced participants); how large and fun the game seemed (inexperienced participants); if they would play *Skyrim* in the future; or discussions on mods that went beyond data found in the previous questions. These interviews shed light on both video game agency and modifications, and I would encourage researchers who are skeptical about what participants might say to trust that they can do an admirable job of explaining abstract phenomenon like perceptions of control in agency if given the opportunity.

Chapter Breakdown

It is my hope that my project reveals the benefits of interdisciplinary studies as well as the important roles that video game modifications and genre conventions play in how gamers (the folk) analyze their perceptions of control in video games and, ultimately, the world. Chapter Two explores the relationship between free will and control, dueling beliefs that humans can freely make their own choices or if their decisions and even lives are determined by factors outside their influence. Free will is a concept that has been discussed for centuries by philosophers, scientists, and theologians. The debate surrounding free will is so vast and complex that no one has proven if it even exists. However, since all video games are programmed in advance, they can never provide radical free will because virtually all choices gamers can make are determined by what the designer and rule system allow. Compatibilism is the only suitable free will framework for game studies because gamers can perhaps feel like they have free will if they consider their perceptions of control rather than terms like radical existentialism or

determinism. This chapter will then pivot to the more important concept to address for this dissertation: what we mean by perceptions of control that play a major role in how humans consider their sense of freedom in digital environments. Both negative and positive freedom are flexible enough to be adopted into other disciplines, revealing that they can also be situated in game studies.

Additionally, Chapter Two provides additional justification for qualitative experimental philosophy with an emphasis on perceived control. Ultimately, I am not using experimental philosophy as a method to solve the free will debate. I am, however, using it as a qualitative philosophical resource that might solve questions of action and design within game studies using perceptions of control, negative freedom, and positive freedom as frames of reference.

Chapter Three explores the importance of genre and game design to perceptions of control. In fact, perceptions of control are influenced by a genre's conventions in what I describe as a spectrum of genre (for example, an on rails visual novel like *Doki Doki Literature Club* to a sandbox game like *Grand Theft Auto 5*). Ultimately, genres are linked to a game's objective. Not only are the generic conventions recognized, but they define what the player-character is supposed to do within the game. This discussion on genre and game design introduces how video game modifications may influence perceptions of control in a "remix culture" in part nurtured by sandbox video game business practices. In other words, mods are variations of extant intellectual property that help companies make more money and extend their games' lives. The commodity in this economic model for sandbox games is the perception of greater user control. Without a doubt, sandbox (open world) games are the most likely games to be modded. Some gamers who play games with more freedom believe that they need mods to enhance their experience in

sandbox games like *Skyrim* since sandbox games are more likely to suffer from game design flaws or possess a vague central objective that eventually becomes tiring.

Chapter Four introduces the first data from my qualitative play study. Although quantitative experimental philosophy assesses the intuitive unconscious "gut reactions" of participants, qualitative studies invite more conscious rational thought; that is, participants can mull over their thoughts and responses. Generally, the narrative mods used in the *Skyrim* play study impacted the participants' gaming experiences, provided that they had some familiarity with the game. More specifically, experience and even mastery with the game determined how participants would discuss their relationship with mods. As mods relate to enjoyment and perceptions of control, the more familiar a participant was with *Skyrim*, the more they began to describe mods as essential to their gaming experience. Therefore, an interesting dynamic exists in these games between great game design and player perceptions of control in which participants began to define mods as needs they require rather than supplements that they are perhaps intended to be.

Chapter Five addresses additional findings on gamer perceptions of freedom in real and digital worlds as well as the trend to describe perceptions of control in games using generic conventions. While Chapter Four explains how participants rationally discussed their experiences with mods (or lack thereof), Chapter Five seemingly produced evidence of intuitions on freedom and video games. First, every individual described perceptions of control in video games using qualities generally associated with negative or positive perceptions of freedom. Importantly, these findings suggest what video games and gamers can tell us about the nature of freedom. Second, gamers used established genres and generic conventions to analyze and compare choices and control in video games (the word "genre" was never explicitly stated in any

of the interview questions). Gamers articulated these differences in their interviews by discussing games they played and comparing the number of options in them to *Skyrim*. Additionally, participants discussed generic features like branching narrative trees that create illusory control over a narrative that will ultimately conclude how the developers intended. The discussion of genre in this chapter showcases the diverse tastes that the study participants have when analyzing video games as they were drawing on schema inspired by video games they believed best represented perceptions of control and freedom.

Finally, Chapter Six discusses challenges and suggestions for future game design based on the study's findings. First, mods are fascinating creations and they will continue to impress gamers who willingly download them for their own amusement. However, if certain genres (such as sandbox games) are going to rely on mods, video game corporations control them since they tamper with extant intellectual property. As a result, the future of video game mods is unclear, but the relationship between modders and companies still favors the corporation. Second, it is possible that fatigue with the sandbox genre is an impediment to game design. Sandbox games may offer the illusion of more creative control and mods can improve the game when the initial experience becomes stale, but both points could also raise questions of lazy game design. Ultimately, design teams should consider that boredom with the entire genre is possible if the promises of a new open world game have already been accomplished by a predecessor. Third, a potential way to develop new questions or understandings of video game perceptions of control would be to create more games that blur generic conventions and produce unique experiences. Although combining genres is risky, the rewards could be fruitful. Finally, even though this dissertation is situated primarily in game studies rather than solely experimental philosophy, the data in the fourth and fifth chapters might provide some insight on how experimental

philosophers can experiment on game design if they feel so inclined. This chapter concludes with limitations of the play study and parting thoughts for future research.

CHAPTER TWO: PERCEPTIONS OF CONTROL AND FREEDOM IN DIGITAL WORLDS

"Well, it's not an easy question for me to answer because it's something I wonder about myself, you know, sort of the baseline here is how much control do we have over our lives? There's a part of me that thinks that, you know, our brains are just collections of chemicals and various balances of chi. When a certain chemical, you know, goes up, certain values go to high, neurons are triggered, and, you know, all the computer-related analogies we can come up with, but there's a deterministic factor to anything physical, anything biological, silicon, what have you. So, yeah, there's a large part of me that says we don't really have any control over our lives. We're just automata living out our existence. But at the same time, that's a pretty self-destructive life philosophy, so I pretend like I have control over my life. And I pretend like I have control over my gameplay, so, really, they're very, very similar." – Play Study Participant 10-M

Chapter Two explores notions of freedom and control in physical and digital environments. In the play study, I developed a sense for how participants would analyze both concepts in their own words. Participant 10-M above responded philosophically when asked how they compare control in games and everyday life. Participant 10-M wrestles with the notion that they are just a deterministic being living out their existence, but since this is a self-destructive philosophy, the healthy solution is to pretend that they have control over their life. This perception extends to their gaming experience. This complex response thus sets the stage for defining principles related to control for game studies and the play study.

This chapter asks the central question: what does it mean to have control in a video game? For example, are gamers in control of all their actions within the digital world, or are they manipulated by forces outside of their control? Initially, this scenario is a microcosm (perhaps

even simulacrum) of the extensive debate surrounding free will, which asks if human agents choose to act on their own volition under the common mantra that they could have done otherwise, or if free will is an illusion since all actions are based on strict antecedents. Participant 10-M touched on this debate in solemn detail. Proponents and detractors of free will have contributed to the debate, each providing definitions and terminology to justify their claims.[7] This second chapter addresses the key tenets of radical existentialism, determinism, and compatibilism. However, free will alone is insufficient when analyzing gamer perceptions of control and agency because the digital world was not created by the gamer, whose actions are determined by the rules and limitations of the game world devised by the designer. So, for example, while one may wish to cheer when they read radical existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre proclaim that people "who hide their complete freedom from themselves out of a spirit of seriousness or by means of deterministic excuses, I shall call cowards," the likelihood that a baseball game can suddenly become a driving simulator just because the gamer wills it is nonexistent (46).

This chapter makes the immediate claim that all video games are compatibilistic due to their interactive nature. Compatibilism means free will and determinism can coexist, provided that an agent has the resources or traits necessary to make certain outcomes happen. Compatibilists have defined aspects of this version of freedom as moral culpability, desire, or control. Games can never provide unbridled control and freedom because their worlds, stories, and even code structures have been determined in advance, but the agency afforded to the gamer in the game renders a complete deterministic interpretation pointless since the gamer often does

[7] For a condensed history, see http://www.informationphilosopher.com/freedom/history/.

make choices within most games. While free will is a complex and broad subject, I view compatibilism in game studies as a full-stop conclusion without much left to contribute. Instead, agency in video game studies situates perceptions of control between the user (gamer) and the creator (designer). As such, this dissertation uses philosophical notions of free will as resources rather than tools for solving free will before pivoting to how gamers engage these environments and how perceptions of control might influence game design.

This chapter introduces the argument, advanced further in Chapter Three, that even though video games have deterministic qualities set forth by the designer, the subject of control presented in these pages can help scholars study gamer experience and even game design techniques that, in turn, could inform perceptions of agency and freedom in both digital and physical environments. A way around the free will impasse is to shift the conversation to perceptions of control seen in negative (freedom from) and positive (freedom to) forms of freedom outlined in the first chapter. If free will is the ability to choose to do otherwise, freedom is the ability to act on what is available. I will present examples of how both definitions of freedom can be interpreted in game studies. As it stands, negative freedom shares similarities with actual control and positive freedom shares similarities with perceived control. With this framing, it is easier to ask how freedom is implicit to game design and play, and what gamer perceptions of control might tell us about the nature of freedom.

This chapter will conclude with an extended justification for qualitative analysis on perceptions of control. As evidenced by Chapter One, experimental philosophy probes the intuitions that common individuals (the "folk") have about philosophical concepts, which I believe is the field's most intriguing contribution. However, the studies surveyed in the first

chapter are focused entirely on free will and therefore are too broad for the purpose of my study. Instead, as a games scholar, I am specifically interested in the "elbow room" that experimental philosophy might afford with a topic like perceived control. When a more specific quality such as perceived control is introduced or promoted, conclusions can be drawn that lay the groundwork for how much control and freedom gamers feel they might possess in environments that have been programmed in advance.

All Video Games Are Compatibilistic

Peter van Inwagen voices his disdain for words like "libertarian," "determinist," and "compatibilist" in "How to Think about the Problem of Free Will" and states, "I very strongly recommend that philosophers never use them—except, of course, when they are forced to because they are discussing the work of philosophers who have been imprudent enough to use them" (331). Although published in 2008, van Inwagen perhaps voices an exasperated tone for the continued scholarly debate about free will that can at times be insufferable. However, van Inwagen also proclaims, "Writers on free will who do not take my advice on this matter are continually saying things that they would be better off not saying—and they would not say these unfortunate things, they would automatically avoid saying them, if they confined their list of technical terms to 'the free-will thesis,' 'determinism,' 'compatibilism' and 'incompatibilism'" (331). These terms require demystification, especially when it comes to each term's association with perceptions of control, so I will explain what free will, determinism, and compatibilism are in philosophy while also revealing their significance in game studies.

An important starting point for any discussion of agency is autonomy. Autonomy is the belief that humans are free to act based on the principles of self-motivation and self-guidance while agency is the ability to act and make choices. Complete autonomy suggests complete control over one's actions. Due to the weight and significance autonomy and agency have on conscious human thought, scholars have pondered their ramifications for millennia. One of the broadest philosophical schools of thought is existentialism, a term given to a movement that has been active since antiquity and can be linked to a plethora of philosophers and disciplines. Importantly, not all free will advocates identify as existentialists since it can be argued the entire movement is outside the classical continuum of free will versus no free will. Additionally, existentialism does not so much prefer free will over determinism (and vice versa), but rather regards the whole continuum as an illusion to make sense of existence within an irrational universe. However, existentialism is a doctrine of freedom and action that emphasizes the individual must take control of their life to make their own purpose since other agents (and even the universe) will not make their decisions for them. For this reason, existentialism is a suitable philosophy for analyzing perceptions of control.

Jean-Paul Sartre is existentialism's most iconic figure, especially in matters concerning choice and control. Sartre's treatise *Existentialism and Human Emotions* is one of his most popular texts. Like many existentialists, Sartre strongly believed that an individual is thrown into the world and then forced to create their purpose, a reiteration of the common existential theme that existence precedes essence. As Sartre proclaims, "Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself" (36). This is a common theme throughout existentialism, for as Flynn confirms, "What you are (your essence) is the result of your choices (your existence) rather than the reverse.

Essence is not destiny. You are what you make yourself to be" (8). Sartre's radical brand of existentialism speaks to an unbridled sense of freedom as he emphatically believes that existence precedes essence, humans act on their own condemnation on this planet, and choices define who they are. Sartre's philosophy suggests that we have complete control over our own lives, and as Birx states, "This open freedom allows individuals to completely control the meaning in their lives and thus to control the meaning of the past, present, and future. Individuals, then, are solely responsible for the future" (495). Because of this open freedom created through existing without a preset goal, Sartre did not believe that human nature was a guiding force of one's actions. Instead, it is up to each person to establish their own goals, values, meaning, and perhaps most important of all, sense of agency in the world.

Existentialists believe that it is up to the individual to figure out their own purpose in life since existence precedes essence, which shares a close bond with the notion of control. However, the most important theme in existentialism is freedom because "the only hope [for an agent] is in his acting and that action is the only thing that enables a man to live" (Sartre 36). Due to this sense of human integrity through agency, existentialists often do not support doctrines of determinism where all choices are confined depending on prearranged internal or external forces. Flynn notes that existentialism "continues to defend individual freedom, responsibility, and authenticity in the midst of various forms of determinism, conformism, self-deception, technologism, and the like so prevalent in our day" (106). Freedom is vital to existentialism because humans are not automated machines, and even the simplest of choices affirms the power they possess. Although many of the concepts in existentialism lie outside the continuum of radical free will or determinism, a central theme is that our freedom to make choices not only

matters, but we can choose who we wish to become. Ultimately, we are completely responsible for and in control of what future might arise because of our actions.

On the surface, it might seem like radical choice and control could play a role in game studies. Video games have become technologically advanced in hardware and software capabilities, as well as reactive to gamer predilections. Further, gamer demands for more choices in virtual environments can be observed in multiple strategies to achieve an in-game goal, character customization that emphasizes aesthetic qualities, branching narrative side quests, and even navigating the virtual world at one's leisure. For many gamers, a selling point of indie and AAA titles alike is the notion that choices made by the gamer can significantly alter the gaming experience. Especially in sprawling sandbox games where the gamer navigates a virtual world at will, many games are marketed to suggest that there are nearly infinite ways for the gamer to exercise autonomy in the virtual world, a promise suggested in games like *World of Warcraft*, *Skyrim*, *Grand Theft Auto 5*, and the indie title *Stardew Valley*.

However, no game can provide this degree of unbridled free will. A gamer cannot break the rules, "change the game," or suddenly decide they want their character to drive a Toyota Prius to Taco Bell unless it is specifically allowed in the code. Even though gamers are thrown into digital worlds that they did not create, they cannot completely make themselves. We are not completely free to make any choice we want or assign every meaning in games if barriers (like generic conventions or game goals discussed in Chapter Three) prevent the gamer from doing so. There is a caveat in every video game, which is that the gamer's decisions will in part be influenced by the structure of the game's code created by the developer. Ultimately, they may

believe that they are “condemned to be free” until the game nudges them in a certain direction (Sartre 23).

In this context, the illusion of choice in games may be defined as deterministic. Determinism stands in stark contrast to the former approach. Birx writes, “The term determinism is usually taken to refer to the doctrine of causal determinism. This holds that future events are caused by, determined by, or necessitated by present ones and that these, in turn, are caused by past ones. It holds that nothing happens by ‘pure’ chance” (299). Determinism mandates that everything has been preordained in advance whether through interstellar deities, the cosmic order of the universe, or even one’s place in life since they cannot go back in time and change situations before they were born. If determinism is true, free will does not exist, and a human’s sense of autonomy is called into question because all choices will lead to the same outcomes.

If determinism is true, we have no control over anything. Determinism is troubling to those who value agency and choice, because how much choice do humans really have if there are no real variables, just a pre-determined chain of causation that extends to the beginning of time? This poses problems for the human belief of free will, for as Mark Leon notes in “Freedom and Determinism: The Importance of Method,” “Determinism, it is held, undermines the freedom (or autonomy) of the agent’s will and takes control of actions out of the agent’s hands” (38). If one completely subscribes to determinism and outcomes are inevitable, no agent wields any agency in any given circumstance. Compared to radical choice proposed by certain existentialists, determinism reveals that agency is an illusion wherein the suggestion that any individual could have chosen to do otherwise will be met with disdain because true freedom cannot exist in a deterministic universe.

Determinism is precisely what Participant 10-M feared as evidenced by their response at the beginning of this chapter. While the context of determinism in physical environments is different than in video games, the message remains the same. Determinism in video games would posit that we have no control because we are playing a part against our will. Daniel Dennett elaborates on Stoic-rooted determinism and writes, "Each of us is assigned a role to play in the tragedy of life, they suggested, and there is nothing for us to do but say our prescribed lines as best we can; there is no room to ad-lib" (2). Like a tragic hero of any tragedy, all humans are merely actors on the world stage and are forced to carry out every prescribed action. Dennett's premier example of this tragedy is the wasp *Sphex*, a notorious species in nature that, when preparing her nest and progeny, will paralyze an insect so that it may be consumed while alive. However, experiments have shown that the *Sphex* is biologically-wired to position the insect in a certain matter, and as Dennett proclaims, "The poor wasp is unmasked; she is not a free agent, but rather at the mercy of brute physical causation, driven inexorably into her states and activities by features of the environment outside her control" (12). This is just one subspecies of one insect in the animal kingdom, so if every animal on the planet has such biological functions governed by their respective environments, biological determinism is, to a degree, observable in nature. More to the point of this dissertation, however, gamers might be the *Sphex* in video games since many features in these environments are outside our control.

It is worth noting that this is not an exhaustive list of determinism because it is a concept governed by a tremendous amount of subtlety. Such is the nature of this circular dilemma wherein supporters and critics of both determinism and free will shall continuously rebuke one another with even the most hair-splitting arguments possible. As a parallel, in certain video

games, paths taken during key moments might suggest divergence, but the storyline ends up converging in a manner that is not fundamentally different. Eichner observes this notion and writes, "Since video games are based on a software program with inscribed rules of behaviour and representational output, the possibilities to significantly influence the course of game progression is determined by the program code" (114). What Eichner suggests is that anything is allowed within the constructs of the game so long as the game's code permits such actions to happen. However, in game studies, a strict deterministic reading would posit that choice in arguably the most interactive medium is a complete illusion. We have no control over our actions since all gamers are at the mercy of a pre-programmed world that either implicitly or explicitly prohibits certain options. Put another way, even if we do not know the levels of freedom we possess in the real world, all gamers know that there will always be restrictions in their favorite titles because many games will explicitly inform the gamer what to do. In fact, almost every "choice" within a game is itself part of a scripted event, which could ultimately suggest that none of our choices even matter. However, Participant 10-M notes this is a negative and perhaps even depressing description of agency in video games, so one solution is to suggest that perceptions of control are compatible with determinism.

Both radical existentialism and determinism demonstrate that a central philosophical argument for agency is free will. According to Michael McKenna and D. Justin Coates in the entry "Compatibilism" from the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, "free will requires the ability to do otherwise, and determinism is incompatible with this." Individuals who cannot deny that many aspects of their day-to-day lives are determined, but also cannot buy into the belief that free will does not exist might find solace in the philosophy of compatibilism. One of the first

examples of compatibilism was a refutation to a famous philosophical dilemma known as the Idle Argument, which posits that if an agent is fated to live or die following some sort of malady, it is useless to visit a doctor because they will either recover or not (Bobzien 182). The philosopher Chrysippus takes exception to this claim, and Bobzien surmises that "Chrysippus makes the point that even if everything is fated, action is not pointless. His emphasis is on the fact that our actions are often necessary conditions for something that is fated to happen, and that fate-determinism should not lead to an increase of inactivity" (355). What Chrysippus presumed would become the foundation for compatibilism. Even if the present and future are motivated by past events, "free will" observed in one's motivations has been linked to ethical responsibility in society despite the dubious nature of determinism. Compatibilism is a philosophy that emphasizes moral responsibility as it is often argued that hard determinism does not account for this vital ethical condition. For compatibilists, responsibility is as practical as it is tongue-in-cheek: "Compatibilists don't mind all their decisions being caused by a metaphysical chain of events, as long as they are not in physical chains" (*The Information Philosopher*).

As these various frameworks prove, the relationship between human autonomy and free will remains one of the most debated issues in philosophy. However, elements of determinism exist in the media—particularly entertainment with narrative qualities—we consume. To use Participant 10-M as a guinea pig once again, some sort of compromise must exist. When asked about control in video games, they stated, "I know what my options are likely to be, what I can do, how I can do it, and so, yeah, there's a degree of control. If you dig down deep, of course, everything is tightly determined and deterministic, but. . .. To be more colloquial, yeah, there's. . .some good play area to work with." Despite our active participation of and appreciation for

video games, they will never provide true free will. If gamers are willing to sacrifice true choice for perceived control of the experience via a compatibilist tweaking of one's concept of video game philosophy (which seems to be the case given the popularity of certain genres and series), the gamer will still believe that they have considerable agency while playing their favorite games. At present, developers are not currently able to promise that game choices can produce diametrically opposing outcomes due to technological constraints of the coding required to produce video games as well as every game's required, finite resources. Even though no game is currently technologically capable of presenting an experience that is entirely up to the gamer based on true choice, compatibilism is the only doctrine of the free will debate to explore in games.

A basic condition of compatibilism is that free will is possible in a deterministic world. Another prerequisite is that a compatibilist believes they are exhibiting free will if their will is in fact in line with the action in question. This is to say that compatibilists would argue a human being demonstrates free will (as well as moral culpability) if the action were not coerced by external forces. As McKenna and Coates suggest, "If an agent is not the ultimate source of her actions, then her actions do not originate in her, and if her actions are the outcomes of conditions guaranteeing them, how can she be said to control them?" Ultimately, some compatibilists opt to explain that free will can exist in a deterministic world through an agent's desires. Although classical philosophers like Thomas Hobbes and David Hume subscribed to such a claim, desire as a motivating indication of free will has also become a central thesis of contemporary compatibilism. Contemporary compatibilist Harry Frankfurt states, "No animal other than man, however, appears to have the capacity for reflective self-evaluation that is manifested in the

formation of second-order desires" (7). Frankfurt defines a first-order desire as one wherein an action is performed (i.e. eating, drinking, listening to music, etc.), while a second-order desire is a desire about a desire in accordance with Frankfurt's suggestion that only humans can think metacognitively about their actions. As he notes, "Someone might want to have a certain desire, in other words, but univocally want that desire to be unsatisfied" (9). Importantly, this appeal to first- and second-order desires aligns with the various definitions of agency outlined earlier, particularly the metacognitive evaluation required for active and intentional decision-making.

Oftentimes, desires can compel agents to act in a manner that they really do not wish, but unfortunately make them come apart despite their best intentions. Mayr and Frankfurt define these moments as alienation from desire where "the motivational efficacy of the agent's strongest desire does not lead to self-control or self-determination, but instead prevents them" (Mayr 48). Frankfurt explores this line of the efficacy of desires to argue that free will exists because those who evaluate these first- and second-order desires are "persons," for as evidenced by his unwilling addict example, the unwilling addict "tries everything that he thinks might enable him to overcome his desires for the drug. But these desires are too powerful for him to withstand" (12). The unwilling addict will fall victim to their addiction, but they at least possess a second-order volition to know that they do not want their desire to take the drug define them or become their will. Their second-order desires are indicative of how they wish to present themselves to the world. On the other hand, a willing addict would also support Frankfurt's claims because the willing addict "takes the drug of her own free will since her will meshes with what she wishes it to be" (McKenna and Coates). By refocusing the argument of agency in a deterministic world from the standpoint of desires about desires, Frankfurt's form of compatibilism supports the

notion that free will is possible in deterministic world, albeit with certain degrees of superficiality.

Although video games possess many deterministic qualities, it is possible that gamers are allowed some control over certain circumstances, but none during others. Christopher Bartel explicitly addresses Frankfurtian desires in "Free Will and Moral Responsibility in Video Games" by analyzing the *Grand Theft Auto* series. Bartel first provides a broad definition for determinism “as the inability to choose to do otherwise” (287). Utilizing Frankfurt’s ideas, Bartel writes, “Frankfurt distinguishes between the freedom to act and the freedom to will: even if our actions are predetermined, our will is not (Ibid, pp. 14–15). A person can willfully choose to want something even if that person cannot willfully choose to act on that wanting” (288). As addressed earlier, compatibilism suggests that even if one’s choices are determined, if their will matches the action and they identify with the result, they are morally responsible for their actions (in addition, this means that the agent also has some degree of free will). Conversely, if a gamer does not have any other options but to commit certain immoral acts in games and they do not identify with or want to do them, they are not acting immorally since the scripted events are forcing them to act against their will (Bartel 290). Bartel focuses on two mandatory missions from *Grand Theft Auto 4* and *Grand Theft Auto 5*. In the former, the gamer must kill police officers while in the latter, the gamer must torture a captive. If a gamer is unwilling to identify with these actions, they are displacing moral responsibility and are merely trying to progress the story. However, if a gamer wishes to accomplish a task like murder a police officer in the game, their actions and will are interlinked. This being the case, the gamer can be held as a morally responsible willing gamer (290). Although moral culpability is outside the scope of the chapter,

Bartel uses compatibilism in a way to combine game studies with a discourse on violence and morality using perceptions of control and will as indicators.

While observing compatibilistic free will through desires is thought-provoking, it also represents a level of complexity that is indicative of the entire debate argued by determinists and their dissenters. Additionally, if desires, too, are decided in advance, and an important tenet of choice is the ability to do otherwise, can humans truly control their desires? For some compatibilists, the easiest course of action seems to be to shift the argument away from free will, moral responsibility, and desire to perceptions of control an agent might possess in various circumstances. Dennett grounds this claim in foreknowledge as a predecessor to control because he notes, "For if we know about them in time, we can plan in the light of our expectations, and take steps to prevent, avoid, preempt, avert, harness, exploit, or accommodate ourselves to those circumstances" (60). Even if certain scenarios remain out of their control, such as weather, natural disasters, or even just plans with other individuals falling through, certain conditions can be changed so that they may be more accommodating. Dennett alludes to several examples in *Elbow Room* to argue his point, such as piloting a remote-control plane, a pilot navigating through a storm to reduce turbulence, or even shopping in a supermarket. However, one of his most poignant (and humorous) examples of control and the ability to have done otherwise can be found in alcohol consumption:

> This time I made a fool of myself; if the situation had been quite different, I certainly would have done otherwise; if the situation had been virtually the same, I might have done otherwise and I might not. The main thing is to see to it that I will jolly well do otherwise in similar situations in the future. (157)

By emphasizing compatibilism from the standpoint of how much control an agent might have, Dennett demonstrates that while there will be scenarios or events when our ability to influence outcomes might be rendered useless, there are others where we are in control of our actions. Having the ability to reflect on what to do or not to do demonstrates the degree of "elbow room" that we can experience in a deterministic world.

Dennett's concept of "elbow room" might also lay the groundwork for meaningful choices in compatibilistic gameplay. If video game choice is illusory, then it is possible to analyze games from a phenomenological position, which would be grounded in gamer experience. Jere Surber makes such a claim in "Freedom as 'Meaningful Choice': Philosophical Lessons from Computer Gameplay," in which he argues that choice can be meaningful in a video game if one considers micro-, median-, and macro-level aspects of gameplay. A micro-level description depicts "*choices* presented in the game and typically responded to through input on a game-controller" (4). While a micro-level analysis would focus on individual choices in the game, a median-level analysis is defined as the "series of such responses to choices presented that constitute a set of possible paths through the game" (4). Finally, the macro-level component of a video game comes at the game's conclusion that is "formed by the final state or states of the game at which at least some paths eventually arrive when one has 'completed the game'" (4). A choice in a game is meaningful if connected choices produce different paths that create different gaming experiences; if these different gaming experiences are themselves different; and if gamer choices that result in consequences form some sort of conclusion (5).

As each component builds on the previous, Surber analyzes an intriguing game to bolster his argument: Naughty Dog's *The Last of Us*. *The Last of Us* is a post-apocalyptic survival

horror game about a man named Joel. A fungal outbreak occurs at the beginning of the game and Joel's daughter is tragically killed by a paramilitary trooper in the confusion. In the flash forward future, Joel is now a smuggler who is tasked with guiding a young girl named Ellie to a secret laboratory across the country as her body apparently bears the cure to the infection. Ironically, *The Last of Us* literally does none of the three things that Surber claims make choices meaningful in games.[8] Although the game has received critical acclaim, it does not contain many of the elements that scholars point to that demonstrate interactive agency, including branching narratives, important moments of choice that produce mutually-exclusive outcomes, or even the possibility of alternate endings. In fact, praise for *The Last of Us* generally emphasizes the story's tight narrative, which, although gripping, is incredibly linear. Nevertheless, Surber proclaims that how the gamer is shaped by the experience of the ending is of paramount importance because the ending "is itself emotionally and morally complex and problematic, and how a given player interprets its significance is a direct function of how he or she has experienced a given game path, consisting of the series of the many choices made by the player on behalf of each character that define the development of their relationship" (9). Admittedly, Surber's diegetic thought experiment presents questions that prompt both criticism and clarification. For Surber, a game that reveals the gamer is merely a conduit to progress the story provides more meaningful reflection of choices than a sandbox series like *Grand Theft Auto* suggests "that the 'freedom' that such open world games offer tends to conflict with and work against the 'meaningful choice' that is often cited as a central feature of the most aesthetically

[8] One game that adheres to Surber's claims is the 2004 Japanese role-playing game (RPG) *Nocturne* released by Atlus. A predecessor to the *Persona* franchise, the game takes dozens of hours to beat, but it also has multiple endings that are the result of choices the gamer makes. Another game that coheres to these claims is Konami's 2001 survival horror game *Silent Hill 2*. Like *Nocturne*, *Silent Hill 2* is unique in that gamer actions made early in the game have consequences and can lead to different outcomes.

compelling games" (12). Surber seems to be indicating that choices in sandbox games are redundant, so they are not particularly meaningful. However, Bartel's essay, for example, seems to contradict Surber's statement as his examples in the open world *Grand Theft Auto* series show what violent content in games could reveal compatibilistic morality.

Nevertheless, Surber concludes that compatibilism is a worthwhile philosophy for analyzing video games because "within this deterministic framework, an individual player is free to choose between (or among) the alternatives presented at any point, thus creating differing game paths and experiences of the game" (15). Even if the games that were chosen for analysis might be contentious, compatibilism must be accepted in game studies as a viable philosophy since all games possess deterministic qualities.

In media studies, compatibilism resembles perceived interactivity. Susanne Eichner believes perceived interactivity "refers to the *feeling of being able to interact*, a concept that is very much aligned with the concept of agency" (65). Ultimately, these feelings of control and influence dictate how gamers will approach any given video game. Video game designers put forward a guise of free choice and action while oftentimes controlling what happens on the screen or interface. The resulting dynamic between the designer and gamer produces a relationship in which the primary component of agency the gamer wields is how much perceived control they feel they possess. However, it might be difficult to ascribe full deterministic control to video games due to the relationship between the designer, gamer, and platform/console. For example, this relationship is highlighted in the Game Narrative Triangle model that suggests certain playing styles, glitches, mods (discussed in Chapters One and Three), and other possibilities are beyond the control of the designer, meaning what the player ultimately does

matters a great deal when interacting with the game (Allison). In terms of perceptions of control in video games, while it is impossible to wield complete control as suggested by radical existentialism, it is also difficult to completely embrace the wholesale notion that video games inhibit all control. Although it has been established that video games are compatibilistic, this chapter must now pivot away from the topic of free will. Fortunately, evaluating control in video games through negative and positive freedom discussed in the first chapter provides new opportunities for additional examination.

Perceptions of Control and Freedom

To further simplify control for the purposes of game studies, it is necessary to contextualize both negative and positive freedom. Negative freedom "is the absence of obstacles, barriers or constraints. One has negative liberty to the extent that actions are available to one in this negative sense" (Carter). Canadian communitarian philosopher Charles Taylor refers to negative freedom as an "opportunity concept" in which "the more doors that are open to a person, the more free she is," meaning no external forces interfere with her progress (Nys 217). Put more colloquially, negative freedom "can incorporate the freedom of religion, the freedom to read Hegel, the freedom to murder an adversary, or the freedom to snort rice crispies through your nose, etc." (Nys 217). Conversely, positive freedom is a policy of action wherein an agent acts "in such a way as to take control of one's life and realize one's fundamental purposes" (Carter). Whereas negative freedom is defined as "freedom from" something, positive freedom means the "capacity to do" something. Although this is a game studies exploration of freedom, British political philosopher Isaiah Berlin rephrased both concepts as questions in his seminal

essay “Two Concepts of Liberty.” Negative freedom would answer the question, “‘What is the area within which the subject – a person or group of persons – is left to do or be what he wants to do or be, without interference by other persons?’” (4). On the other hand, positive freedom would answer the question, “What, or who, is the source of control or interference that can determine someone to do, or be, one thing rather than another?’” (4). These questions have been used (and re-used) to frame negative and positive perceptions of freedom for multiple discourses. Ian Carter presents in his *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on positive and negative freedom a scenario in which he asks the reader to consider an intersection without traffic. Although the driver may be free to turn wherever they wish, what if the point of the journey is to pick up cigarettes? As Carter notes, “Rather than *driving*, you feel you *are being driven*, as your urge to smoke leads you uncontrollably to turn the wheel first to the left and then to the right.” When used in this manner, the definitions of positive and negative freedom argue for or against free will, and both concepts even have been associated with Sartrean existentialism that links freedom with condemnation (Carveth 215).

Other scholars have attached normative moral significance to the freedom debate, going as far as to state that positive freedom is “doing what one should want, as opposed to doing what one does want” (Blau 548), or that its ultimate goal “is to be a moral agent” (Dimova-Cookson 528). Participant 18-M was one of the few participants in the play study to suggest there is an ethical, albeit inconsistent, parallel to video games and noted, “You’ll be, like, good or bad, so any choice that you make sort of aligns your day in that pattern. But then you have the choice of, like, completely dismissing what pattern you’re choosing and going to, like, doing something completely righteous or whatever.” Both concepts of freedom have also been linked to patient

autonomy in medical ethics (Takala 227). In addition, some have argued that positive freedom in particular is linked to self-discovery because "it is also an end in itself, and is thus part of their fulfillment" (Frederick 45). Principles of negative and positive freedom are quite popular, even serving as the central focus for a personal development blog post titled "Freedom From…Freedom To" by Brett and Kate McKay from the website *The Art of Manliness*. Gendered language of the website aside, the post presents the argument that many individuals are unable to create tangible goals when overburdened by too much negative freedom (McKay and McKay).

Yet both concepts can be applied to game studies, notably the MDA approach that stands for "mechanics," dynamics," and "aesthetics." Although mechanics (game design, rules, etc.) are controlled by the designer and aesthetics (the evoked emotions) belong to the gamer, dynamics represent the possibilities for freedom within any given game. According to Hunicke, LeBlanc, and Zubek, dynamics "describe the run-time behavior of the mechanics acting on player inputs and each other's' outputs over time" (2). Simply speaking, dynamics allow the "fun" within the game to happen based on what the system creates. In this context, gamers may evaluate their senses of freedom in digital environments through dynamics like challenge that may influence perceptions of opportunities, restraints, or even what is entirely within their control. To refocus Carter's driving argument, video game mechanics may drive us in certain directions and present inescapable functions, but there should be moments in which we at least perceive to be in control of certain interactions as well as experiences like enjoyment.

When the discussion of free will in video games becomes insufficient, freedom picks up the slack. This is because if free will is predominately about choice, freedom provides the

necessary nuance of what is within the gamer's control to act upon. Especially in political discourses, the debate between positive and negative perceptions of freedom are somewhat contentious. It is important to know these distinctions, but I am not using these terms for political or moral reasons. Additionally, I will not argue that one form of freedom should be leveraged over the other. I am most interested in the context of how negative freedom is an opportunity concept defined by constraints, and positive freedom is a form of action. I believe that perceptions of control are at the root of both concepts, and both negative and positive freedom will be vital to this dissertation's subsequent chapters as I explain how gamers define control in both reality and digital worlds. This underlying feeling of control (particularly perceived control when making choices) will further be addressed through media principles that I believe describe both negative and positive freedom in video games.

What Representations of Negative Freedom Might Resemble in Video Games

This chapter defined negative freedom as "freedom from" something. These could be external forces, obstacles, or restraints in line with a Sartrean notion of radical choice. For the purpose of argument, negative freedom in game design would also be consistent with what the designer perhaps intends or allows the gamer to possess, even though the designer actually controls much of the experience. All video games or digital worlds are compatibilistic at best, so scholars concerned with opportunities or restraints in these environments are more likely to use terminology consistent with negative freedom. Such terms associated with this phenomenon include immersion, the suspension of disbelief, perceived interactivity, and illusory agency. For example, Lev Manovich alludes to how interactive media plays with the concept of perceived

control in navigable space: "Since navigable space can be used to represent both physical spaces and abstract information spaces, it is only logical that it has also emerged as an important paradigm in human-computer interfaces" (249). Representation and arrangement of navigable space is one method for analyzing digital environments and what the future might ultimately resemble. Janet Murray was a pioneer for analyzing narratives through these frameworks. Her 1997 text, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, not only argues for the evolution of narratives through computers, but also became a seminal text in academic media studies. Aptly named after the staging environment from *Star Trek*, "The [H]olodeck is an appropriate entertainment medium for the fortunate citizens of such a world: a utopian technology applied to the age-old art of storytelling" (Murray 15). The theoretical assumption of the Holodeck is that it is a reactive virtual world that responds to a user's actions and motivations. Although illusory, this world "looks and behaves like the actual world and includes parlor fires, drinkable tea, and characters, like Lord Burleigh and his household, who can be touched, conversed with, and even kissed" (15). If technology ever does catch up to this ideal suggested in *Star Trek*, the opportunities for consumers to interact with interactive media will continue to evolve as well.

Throughout her book, Murray posits that interactive narratives should be immersive. Although immersion was discussed in Chapter One, it is important to provide more analysis for the purposes of its link to the opportunities associated with negative freedom in digital environments. Additionally, immersion is a concept that some participants in my play study described in their own words. Immersion refers to "the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality, as different as water is from air, that takes over all of our attention, our whole perceptual apparatus" (Murray 98). A digital environment (especially narrative in this context) is considered immersive if a user becomes absorbed in this alternate world. Yet

successful immersion must also produce what Samuel Taylor Coleridge called the "willing suspension of disbelief" (Murray 110). In Murray's estimation, the suspension of disbelief is vital to immersion because it directly impacts the degree of absorption in any fictional world. As she notes, "We do not suspend disbelief so much as we actively create belief. Because of our desire to experience immersion, we focus our attention on the enveloping" (110). It is fitting that expressions like "suspend belief" and "actively create belief" are related to the concepts of actual and perceived control discussed in Chapter One. After all, if a user becomes absorbed in a world and creates belief by disregarding what they know to be real, they will receive a much more rewarding interactive experience because they will forget about the obstacles and restraints preventing them from performing certain actions.

Although Murray's definition is not cited in their study, Witmer, Jerome, and Singer define immersion as a "psychological state characterized by perceiving oneself to be enveloped by, included in, and interacting with an environment that provides a continuous stream of stimuli and experiences" (299). By this definition, immersion is again linked to the notion of the suspension of disbelief, which is further evidenced by the fact that immersion "is reduced by extraneous distractions and is increased by factors that facilitate direct interaction with the [virtual environment] and the performance of VE task activities" (299). Ultimately, the research on immersion conducted by Witmer, Jerome, and Singer suggests that a user's "ability to rapidly adapt to the [virtual environment] may be a key component of immersion in virtual environments," because any feature of the world that results in a loss of immersion will remind the user of the obstacles that might limit opportunities consistent with negative freedom (310). Taken together, both Murray and Witmer's team demonstrate that an individual will achieve successful immersion in an interactive environment if the environment does not draw attention to

itself in ways that takes the user out of the experience (i.e. broken immersion as evidenced by the first chapter).

Opportunities and desires will become more pronounced in digital worlds as technology continues to offer more assurances of future possibilities because "we bring expectations based on the affordances of the digital medium, and as human beings seeking expression, we are drawn to exploiting those affordances" (Murray 94). However, these worlds possess deterministic qualities that often distract us from opportunities in digital worlds, and an individual, in many cases, wields very little actual control over what occurs in their favorite media outlets. Determinism is never explicitly addressed in these media theories from the standpoint of interactivity, but there is a tacit understanding it exists. Murray suggests the "need to define the boundary conventions that will allow us to surrender to the enticements of the virtual environment," implying that our perceptions of how much our choices matter in these environments rests entirely on how willing we are to play along (103). However, when users become aware of what the code disallows, immersion is broken, revealing the obstacles or restraints that might prevent some opportunities from occurring as well as the disconnect between actual and perceived control. Murray's point that (digital) narratives are procedural also speaks directly to constraints that inhibit negative freedom. She writes, "Procedural authorship means writing the rules by which the texts appear as well as writing the texts themselves. It means writing the rules for the interactor's involvement, that is, the conditions under which things will happen in response to the participant's actions" (152). Even before users interact with media, the events or rules have already been programmed in advance. For example, in more traditional narratives, Ned Stark from *Game of Thrones* is still dead, no matter how unjust the execution is. Oedipus still kills his father and dooms Thebes, even if his intentions of revealing

the assailant were noble. Lord Voldemort still manages to come back to life and wage war on Hogwarts, even after seven readings of the *Harry Potter* series. Equally, if we were to analyze interactive media, we will see some of these same procedures. Even if all her limit breaks—character-specific unique attacks that gradually build as characters take damage—are acquired, Aeris will always die at the end of *Final Fantasy VII*'s first disc. In *The Last of Us*, the gamer will never wield enough agency to allow the game's protagonist, Ellie, to make her own decision at the end and die willingly to save the world. Then there is a game like *Mass Effect 3* that, despite assurances from BioWare that decisions made throughout the series would matter, the gamer will always be led to a predetermined plane of existence with the omniscient being the "Catalyst" that suggests contrary evidence. These events will continue to occur as they are fixed outside of our involvement in an unbroken chain. While fascinating attempts at fanfiction and fangames can perhaps reject these outcomes (and introduce new dynamics of perceptions of control), video game companies can and will demonstrate complete control over their intellectual property and issue a cease-and-desist notice if they believe their brand is threatened, as was the case with the popular *Streets of Rage Remake* (Kretzschmar and Stanfill 13). We are never truly unbound in narratives or virtual environments because all that can be accomplished has been determined by forces outside of our actual control.

However, to reuse an earlier quote by Eichner, perceived interactivity "refers to the *feeling of being able to interact*, a concept that is very much aligned with the concept of agency" (65). These perceived feelings of interactivity are integral to discovering opportunities in digital worlds like video games. With one minor semantic adjustment, perceived interactivity can be modified to mean perceived control in virtual environments like video games. Eichner proposes such a stance by addressing Murray's conceptualization of the Holodeck with actual agency in

virtual worlds and notes, “Since video games are based on a software program with inscribed rules of behaviour and representational output, the possibilities to significantly influence the course of game progression is determined by the program code” (114). As discussed earlier, radical free will must be set aside for all video games because agency has to be defined “as a restricted and relational concept of significant actions that results in the processes of cognition, evaluation and emotion. As such, it is not a question of freedom versus restriction but a question of perception” (Eichner 115).

Nevertheless, Eichner’s degree of perception is related to Murray’s belief that successful immersion in narratives occurs when a participant suspends their disbelief, which is reiterated in “Towards a Taxonomy of Perceived Agency in Narrative Game-Play” by Bride Mallon, who writes, “Players suspend disbelief when game playing and they expect a well-crafted product to disguise the preprogrammed nature of the narrative. They measure their enjoyment of the interactive experience partly in terms of how well this suspension of disbelief is cultivated” (2). As these scholars suggest, perceived agency is a phenomenon that proposes even if a participant understands the virtual environment (or narrative) has been constructed beforehand, the willing suspension of disbelief will override the illusion of control. In fact, a thorough investigation of the evolution of perceived interactivity reveals that good game design (which will be further in Chapter Three) often operates through deceptive practices of manipulating perceptions of control. In this sense, Esther MacCallum-Stewart and Justin Parsler define illusory agency as the “process of ‘tricking’ a reader into believing they have greater impact on and import within the game.” Agency in video games might be viewed as a psychological contract between the user and game because, “As long as the player goes along with the game experience as presented and does not peer too closely at what they are doing, then a sense of agency is maintained”

(MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler). Although MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler note that illusory agency is a tactic primarily used by game designers who create linear narratives, all games will contain this quality as their narratives will have to conclude, or the gamer will just eventually stop playing out of boredom.

Despite the promising opportunities in video games, negative freedom might also remind us of constraints in these digital worlds. Some games choose to outright mock gamers, immersion, and their sense of control. In "'A Man Chooses, a Slave Obeys': Agency, Interactivity, and Freedom in Video Gaming," Rowan Tulloch relies on 2K's critically-acclaimed title *BioShock* to argue some video games highlight just how little agency gamers possess, especially in games that utilize a tighter narrative. Tulloch cites Janet Murray's concepts of agency in *Hamlet on the Holodeck* and introduces the basic tenets of compatibilism in video games without referring to the philosophy. By emphasizing Murray's suggestions about authorship and agency, Tulloch notes that "whilst players do trigger certain actions in that they call forth certain pieces of the programmed code and thus certain experiences, they are far from the original creators of the action" (31). *BioShock* is popular in part because the game's grand narrative reveals that the gamer as the player-character has been manipulated all along by a character named Atlas (real name Fontaine), who serves as a mentor and initially claims that the real villain in the city of Rapture is its creator, Andrew Ryan. However, the protagonist is mentally controlled by the game's villains, and must obey certain commands. Ryan hysterically utters the programmed phrase, "Would you kindly?" to the protagonist during their only confrontation, and the protagonist proceeds to cudgel him to death without any input from the gamer. As games are lauded as digital artifacts that promote user agency, a game like *BioShock* "questions the applicability of any concept of interactivity to video gaming, by problematizing

the fundamental notion of player freedom or what we can call complete individual agency" (Tulloch 32). In other words, the claim that choice in video games is illusory is reaffirmed.

When analyzed through a negative freedom lens, video games promote the opportunities that can be found in these worlds if the user becomes immersed or suspends their disbelief. These opportunities afforded to the gamer are important to both their perceptions of control and enjoyment as they play the game. However, these opportunities can also be illusory, and the individual is restricted by what they can or cannot do within the environment's code, which will certainly impact their experience. Ultimately, negative freedom in digital worlds like games can be taken away at a moment's notice. What might be harder to take away is positive freedom if the user is provided with a chance to manipulate these limitations in a manner that allows them the "capacity to do" something for their benefit.

What Representations of Positive Freedom Might Resemble in Video Games

Positive freedom is the "capacity to do" something, meaning that it can be linked to taking control, willpower, evaluating opportunities, setting goals, and developing purpose. If negative freedom is linked to actual control, the designer would have no control over what the gamer perceives to control in their game, which would be akin to positive freedom. In video games, these qualities might diverge from negative freedom and invite the gamer to consider what power they possess. This realization might be observed in a narrative thought experiment that requires the participant to use their imagination to contemplate an intellectual challenge. For example, a famous thought experiment in ethics known as the "Trolley Problem" forces participants to choose between doing nothing and allowing a runaway trolley to kill several

people or pulling a lever that will divert the trolley from its main course, but one unsuspecting individual dies in the process.

According to James Robert Brown and Yiftach Fehige in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, a central question presented in thought experiments is summed up thusly: "More precisely, are there thought experiments that enable us to acquire new knowledge about the intended realm of investigation without new empirical data?" Video games as worthwhile thought experiments is a topic broached by Marcus Schulzke in "Simulating Philosophy: Interpreting Video Games as Executable Thought Experiments." Schulzke relies on popular games like *Spec Ops: The Line*, *BioShock*, *Fallout*, and *Portal* to bolster his argument that the added dimension of interactivity in video games makes them suitable thought experiments because they can be "used to explain, support, or critique a theory" (256). For example, Schulzke believes that *Spec Ops: The Line*, while not explicitly a thought experiment per se, provides the framework for such scenarios since the game "raises countless examples of how a well-intentioned military intervention to protect people from a natural disaster might go wrong due to cultural misunderstandings, poor communication, and the use of soldiers in roles that they are not trained to perform" (257). Depending on how each of these conditions are utilized could be the subject for such hypothetical thought experiments. Schulzke provides very specific instances where thought experiments might occur in games, and whether or not any given game can serve as the model for a valid thought experiment depends on how it will be used. Schulzke concludes that video game thought experiments are valuable because they "encourage players to reflect on their gameplay experiences" (264). Of course, these experiences should not be taken literally since gamers are not actually invited to think about their roles as, for example, hardened combat specialists. Instead, there is an opportunity to reflect on questions of epistemology through the

presentation of hypothetical and often fanciful conditions that enable individuals to think about the implications of a particular logic. Ultimately, since metacognition and the ability to reflect are central components to human agency, perceptions of control in video games are important as one of the most pronounced selling points of gaming is that no gamer should have the same experience.

Designing video games as thought experiments can potentially showcase principles of positive freedom that can be learned in virtual environments. Aligning with positive freedom, video games can teach us something about what it means to act on decisions or develop a sense of purpose in life. In "*Life Is Strange* and 'Games Are Made': A Philosophical Interpretation of a Multiple-Choice Existential Simulator with Copilot Sartre," philosopher Luis de Miranda argues that games can provide new ways for exploring existential concepts outlined earlier using Dontnod's multi-choice game *Life Is Strange* as a parallel to Sartrean existentialism. de Miranda does not refute that video game code is deterministic, but believes "games like *LIS* can help us reflect on such an autonomy, even if they simulate existential situations where limited choices are available" (838). de Miranda also succeeds in suggesting that video games can be useful philosophy simulators because, "The fact that players—often teenagers themselves, but not only—are given an opportunity to decide and exchange about what to do in crucial existential simulated situations transforms the game into a series of philosophical, ethical, emotional, and collective thought experiments" (835-836). For de Miranda, it is inconsequential that a game like *Life Is Strange* has constraints (all video games do!). What is important is that the game poses many existential questions and can allow us to assign and weigh value on opportunities and choices presented to us within a simulation that may impact our daily lives. As a gamer, I found several of the choices assumed that we appreciated the game's primary figures, Max Caulfield

and Chloe Price, and I must also admit that there were moments when I truthfully enjoyed neither. That said, I agree with de Miranda's use of the game to present existential questions in a way that could provide meaning to our real lives as both mundane and large choices in the game often do have consequences.

Even if games have pre-defined outcomes or choices are illusory, gamers have power over certain choices according to the concepts of embedded and emergent narratives first posited in 1999 at the Game Developers Conference by game designer Marc LeBlanc (Salen and Zimmerman 383). Both concepts were later adapted by Salen and Zimmerman in the 2003 text *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*. The embedded narrative is what has already been programmed in advance to usher the story along, or "the 'pre-scripted' moments and structures that are relatively fixed in the game system" (383). These are the narratives that the gamer will have no control over, including Aeris' death in *Final Fantasy VII*, cinematic cutscenes in *Metal Gear Solid*, Nyx descending upon the planet in *Persona 3*, and countless other examples.

At face value, these examples would align with determinism discussed earlier. However, games also create emergent narratives that are governed by the gamer and that are not controlled by the designer. According to Salen and Zimmerman, "emergent narrative elements arise during play from the complex system of the game, often in unexpected ways. Most moment-to-moment narrative play in a game is emergent, as player choice leads to unpredictable narrative experiences" (383). While an embedded narrative will continue with or without a gamer's consent, an emergent narrative develops as the gamer interacts with the video game. For example, while a game like *The Last of Us* is governed by a strict embedded narrative, the gamer's emergent narrative might come through the strategy through which Joel and Ellie dispatch enemies. Will they stealthily meander through the post-apocalyptic wasteland? While

tense and less eventful, this strategy is safer and will conserve items. Conversely, the gamer also has the option to jump into skirmishes with all guns blazing. This method is akin to a 1980s Schwarzenegger movie, but in this game world, the strategy will result in a depleted inventory at best or death at worst. How emergent narratives develop within video games is partially motivated by genres that possess their own rule systems. What remains consistent, however, is that an embedded narrative could be classified as hard determinism in that no matter what happens within the game, there will be moments that the gamer will have no control over since they have been preordained well in advance through causal antecedents that continue to build off one another. An emergent story, on the other hand, allows gamers circumstantial freedom to "do what they want" within the game provided it is allowed by the code and rule system. At least from the perception of gamers, these emergent narratives are caused by them and their own choices rather than external forces or restraints that inhibit certain opportunities.

Video games may never provide us with unbridled control, but all these scholars provide support for how much control users perceive to have over the experience, and what we conceive that level or amount of control to mean in interactive environments. At the heart of these philosophical and psychological sources is how a gamer perceives control in their individual gaming experience. If viewed in this manner, even if virtual worlds do not offer true freedom, the amount of agency a gamer perceives to have remains an underlying factor for what makes a video game enjoyable and worth playing. Gaming experience, therefore, provides an opportunity to explore perceived control in qualitative experimental philosophy, which should be a useful resource for such a project.

The Roles of Control and Freedom in Qualitative Analysis

Many contemporary philosophers contemplate components of agency, and a few have endeavored to take the debate from the confines of armchair philosophy into experimental philosophy, which explores metaphysical concerns through empirical studies. Experimental philosophers generally believe that their mission is "to determine what leads us to have the intuitions we do about free will, moral responsibility, the afterlife. The ultimate hope is that we can use this information to help determine whether the psychological sources of the beliefs undercut the warrant for the beliefs" (Knobe and Nichols 7). Ultimately, intuition plays a central role in many experimental philosophy studies. At its most basic, intuition is defined as knowledge gained without evidence (this knowledge may or may not be unconscious). Intuition has also been linked to instinctual or gut feelings that an individual may be asked to process instantly in certain scenarios. Although humans possess the ability to think both rationally and intuitively, the two levels of thought are different. Rational thinking allows for an individual to see various sides of an issue or problem and evaluate divergences with a general idea in mind of what might be considered the stronger outcome through careful reasoning. On the other hand, intuitions are "non-inferential judgements that are not a product of conscious reasoning, are fairly immediate, and not slowly or carefully reasoned" (Andow 1133). Whereas quantitative tools measure these intuitive judgments, qualitative tools might measure responses that are "carefully reasoned." Experimental philosophy research generally emphasizes the analysis of folk intuitions, or viewpoints of lay individuals who traditionally do not have specialized philosophy backgrounds. This quality appears in the 2004 article titled "The Phenomenology of Free Will" by Eddy Nahmias et al., who argue that a demographic composed of "ordinary

people" might be a welcome alternative to "philosophers' competing introspective descriptions [that] will remain in yet another free-will stalemate" (164). As of 2019, many experimental philosophy studies have continued this trend of analyzing the beliefs of typical individuals.

Unfortunately, many experimental philosophy studies are rooted in the free will debate as evidenced by the first chapter. Free will is a complicated and often subjective issue that poses complications when featured in quantitative investigation. If participants are going to say they believe in free will, is the principal investigator going to claim that the participants are incorrect by providing a definition that supports their own views? Ultimately, experiments involving free will might be linked to what Nadelhoffer et al. refer to as the "problem of contamination," which occurs "when researchers' own theoretical commitments unduly influence or bias their findings" (28). For example, if a philosopher were predisposed to agree with either radical free will, compatibilism, or determinism, this might be expressed in their research or tools designed for their participants. Certain experimental studies also have issues with replicability (Seyedsayamdost 96). Central to this dissertation, however, when questions of free will are raised, results are usually mixed. If concepts like free will, determinism, and compatibilism are the only themes explored in any given study (i.e. probing the common folk for their intuitions), data appears to be inconclusive as indicated by some of the experiments mentioned in Chapter One.

Especially for game studies, control is a simpler concept to probe. Research suggests when complicated terms like free will are simplified and philosophical notions like determinism, compatibilism, or libertarianism are omitted entirely, data emerges on how participants consider control and decision-making. One experiment addressing free will was conducted by Feldman et

al. Unlike some other studies, Feldman and his team scaled back on mentioning philosophies like determinism and compatibilism, and instead chose to analyze free will in terms of specific qualities generally associated with agency. Some of these qualities include "the extent to which [people] like and enjoy making choices, their perceived ability to successfully make decisions, their perception of making choices as being less difficult and finally their satisfaction with decisions they have made" (240). According to the authors, "Four studies confirmed that, at least among laypersons, belief in free will is strongly and multiply linked to the idea of choosing" (244). In other words, at least according to the researchers, if freedom is linked to choices or decision-making, it can be speculated that many individuals derive some sense of enjoyment from their choices (241). The authors conclude their research by noting that a sense of control or influence might be an underlying issue: "Believing in free will may be a socially cognitive elaboration of the feeling of control that one gets from making choices" (244). This suggests participants reporting on their perceptions of control when making choices needs to be explored in future research as control is a central to human agency.

Control certainly can be linked to experimental philosophy as it appears at least tangentially in "The Phenomenology of Free Will" by Nahmias et al., who note that a goal of future research would be to measure the "process of deliberation people feel they exercise control, how much control they feel they have, and how it seems to them to exercise it" (175). Further, the research presented by Feldman et al. supports the notion that agential control can contribute to satisfaction and beliefs in free will (244). This is also supported by Ena Inesi et al., who argue that "power satisfies the thirst for choice, and choice quenches the desire for power, because each replenishes a sense of control" (1047). However, much like the terms free will,

determinism, and compatibilism, control itself is broad as it can be used to mean actual or perceived control defined in the first chapter. As surmised by Nadelhoffer and Matveeva in "Positive Illusions, Perceived Control and the Free Will Debate," are actual and perceived control. Actual control "refers to how much actual control a person has over her decisions, actions, and environment" in any given situation while perceived control "refers to an individual's *beliefs* about how much control she has" (502). It is arguable that perceived control may be more important to our well-being than actual control: "Because we have a desire for competence, causal efficacy, and control, we quite naturally do better when we believe that we have these things regardless of whether we actually do" (Nadelhoffer and Matveeva 502). By utilizing such words as "feel," "desire," and "sense," present literature is interested in perceived control rather than actual control.

This dissertation wishes to participate in this level of philosophical inquiry as it relates to game studies. Although perceptions of control should be explored, it is worth noting the present literature in this dissertation that cite studies of control appear to be quantitative by design. Feldman et al. utilized pre-made scales to assess how their participants evaluated choice. Similarly, two video game studies cited in Chapter One that support perceptions of control in video games depend on quantitative measures. Schrader and Nett relied on 7-point Likert scales (65). Rogers, Dillman-Carpentier, and Barnard also used pre-made subscales (32). Quantitative analysis is often enlightening, and these studies recruited a few hundred participants. That said, there is the potential for confusion when trying to provide quantitative evidence for subjective experiences like perceptions. For example, Schrader and Nett hypothesized "that the subjective perception of being in control over gameplay would result in greater enjoyment but also in

higher boredom" (64). While the researchers were primarily interested in the learning potential of serious games, the notion that control can simultaneously produce greater enjoyment and boredom could benefit from further questioning. It is true that high control could either lead to enjoyment or boredom, but there is room for interpretation that might indicate someone could be good at a task and not get bored, or someone could be incompetent at a task and become bored. In this case, additional questioning may have helped. Apparently, their results agreed with their hypothesis: “Boredom then slightly increased in the high control condition and decreased in the reduced and moderate conditions across the rounds of play, suggesting that the game became less boring when playing the second and third round in conditions with reduced and moderate control compared to the high control condition” (68). No discussion in the research suggests that talking to participants might flesh out key details. After all, perceived control is the belief that people have control, and the specified subjects need to be the ones who describe such phenomena in their own words.

Further, there is a potential in quantitative analysis to conflate key principles (admittedly, this is also true for qualitative analysis). For example, Schrader and Nett tested three different versions of their serious game *Liver Defense*. It could be suggested that these three versions—high, moderate, and reduced control—were defined in terms of the challenge they afforded to participants since “the conditions differed in the provided glucose balance and the amount and time between incoming particles as well as the blood sugar decrease per second” (65). This is interesting because it could denote that the reduced control game was impossible to beat (which would impact perceptions of control negatively), or it was possible to beat with greater game competence (which could have positive impacts on perceptions of control). Although my play

study had a similar function in that the modded version obviously had more content (more conditions), the difficulty remained the same in both games, meaning a lack of resources did not suggest a change in challenge. In the case of mods research and control, my rationale for working with mods is exploratory. If something is "enhanced," the perception is it is better than what came before. If this reasoning stands, that would mean mods can enhance perceptions of control by influencing the analogous sensations outlined earlier (immersion, enjoyment, curiosity, surprise, etc.) to impact gamer needs and predilections. Mods enhance perceptions of control by giving an individual more options. If these mods are not in the base game, that means perceptions could be enhanced by what is viewed as unique.

In sum, researchers are missing out on several research opportunities by not including qualitative elements into their work. Especially in matters of gamer perceptions of control, what exactly are the participants contributing? More specifically, what sort of knowledge is missing? It seems to me that if we are going to experiment on gamer perceptions of control, we should begin to ask what gamers define control as and where they observe it in games. The most effective way to accomplish this feat is by talking with them via qualitative analysis rather than sheer statistics. If, as has been presented in several texts, a goal of experimental philosophy is to survey the philosophical beliefs of ordinary people who do not hold advanced degrees in philosophy, studies that emphasize a single concept of agency such as perceived control could produce unique insights. By linking philosophy with game studies, the play study in this dissertation does not use empirical data to argue for one philosophical position over the other, but rather engaged in interviews with gamers to introduce new questions about freedom and game design.

Conclusion

As I reflect on Participant 10-M's quote in the beginning of this chapter, I think the first time I questioned autonomous choice in games was when I played *Silent Hill 2*, which has been lauded for its psychological themes in symbolism, monster designs, and even lore of the eponymous town. For example, while the first *Silent Hill* presented the Otherworld as a demonic paradise that was presumably constructed by a cult, the characters in *Silent Hill 2* each succumb to their own inner demons manifesting in their own Otherworld representations of *Silent Hill*. What is unique about *Silent Hill 2* is that the game never explicitly tells the gamer anything outside of the fact that James Sunderland's deceased wife has asked for him to come to the resort town. The result is the gamer piecing together their own narrative with what little clues they can find over the course of the game.

However, this is also reflected in the game's mechanical use of choice as well because much of *Silent Hill 2*'s agency is not revealed to the gamer and remains largely hidden. For example, there are at least seven different endings that the gamer can unlock, but all of them require subtle elements of choice perhaps unbeknownst to even the most seasoned gamers. If James looks at a knife in his inventory that a character named Angela gives him and the gamer forgets to heal often, James will commit suicide at the end of the game. If James does not look at the picture of his deceased wife in his inventory and checks on Maria in the hospital, the gamer might end up with Maria at the end of the game (which is not to suggest this is actually a happy ending). Even though the game never explicitly alerts the gamer to what is transpiring, the confusion adds to the experience of playing *Silent Hill 2* by suggesting that the gamer is entirely responsible for James' fate based on how they choose to interact with the game through him. It

might be a risky endeavor to design a game where the gamer has no knowledge that their choices are impacting gameplay, but if *Silent Hill 2* were any indication, such a game design would be talked about for years if developed efficiently. Yet every choice is programmed in advance in the game, and any perception that I am in complete control of James' actions is ruined by the fact that I can locate a strategy guide to inform my decisions. Perhaps Participant 10-M was right. It is better to feel like we are in control of our actions in games to avoid the existential dread that our game choices might have been manipulated by the designer.

This chapter defined the principles of agency associated with video games. The reality is that concepts like deterministic control and digital code go together. This view is even argued by Lawrence Lessig in *Code 2.0* in that an "invisible hand of cyberspace is building an architecture that is quite the opposite of its architecture at birth. This invisible hand, pushed by government and by commerce, is constructing an architecture that will perfect control and make highly efficient regulation possible" (4). People feel like they can do some things in digital worlds, but there are clearly some things they cannot. There is not strict top-down control, but there is some control that will influence user experience. Therefore, compatibilism is an intriguing philosophical approach for media studies because "digital compatibilism" could be defined as the freedom to perform actions in digital environments, full-knowing that these environments have been pre-programmed by rules and coding structures long before the individual decided to interact with them. Although this environment exists in a deterministic state, there is no way it can operate without the individual making choices to advance its functions. The participant's choices matter, even if they are illusions predicated on how much control the digital environment allows the individual to think they possess (perceived control). Ultimately, how much control

people think they have could be greater or less than what the environment actually permits, and the manners in which the options at the level of experience are determined lie in the level of the architecture noted by Lessig.

Agency is intentional and transformative. However, the belief that one is in control of their actions (whether actual or perceived) is the underlying mechanism for agency as it speaks to goal acquisition, a sense of purpose and meaning, and even signifies the importance of free will in that agents presumably act on their own volition. As explained by three dueling philosophies (radical existentialism, determinism, and compatibilism), free will denotes that we control our actions and behaviors, it is an illusion entirely, or there is some sort of amalgamation conveniently in the middle of these two extremes. Unfortunately, thinking solely about video games in terms of their compatibilistic qualities will always lead back to the same discussion of not having any free will in deterministic worlds, and I defined the concepts of control, positive freedom, and negative freedom using video game studies as a framework to combat this dilemma. Although a description of both agency and free will is necessary for such a project, it feels like a fruitless endeavor to discuss having free will in simulated environments like video games because all of them have been preprogrammed in advance and are therefore compatibilistic. In other words, this is a full stop conclusion that other scholars can argue if they feel so inclined. With that said, if the conversation were instead shifted to address gamers' perceptions of control, negative freedom, or positive freedom via qualitative analysis, data might be more applicable to gamer experience and game design strategies. I will now address how game design, genre analysis, and video game modifications (mods) are currently situated in this discussion of perceived interactive control.

CHAPTER THREE: VIDEO GAME MODS: PANDORA'S BOX TO GREATER PERCEPTIONS OF CONTROL IN SANDBOX GAME DESIGN

Introduction

"I guess a game like Skyrim, for example, is very specifically presenting you with like a larger variety of choices than perhaps another game might be, and so because of that—I mean, that's one of the interesting things is defining, like, how much choice is available in a given game or how we talk about that. And, obviously, since I'm also in this field, I've look at or thought about myself, like, how we actually define how much choice a game gives you. So, you know, I would say like if it's a spectrum, a game like Skyrim is pretty far on the giving the player a lot of choices and letting them be in control of their own actions. Spectrum. Yeah. Whereas another game, like, in the open world genre, I guess, like, games in that genre tend to be that way. For a comparison, take something like Tetris. You are in control of your actions. It's just a very limited set of actions you can do. Moving the blocks, basically." –Play Study Participant 27-M

Chapter Three explores how a video game's genre will influence discussions of control, freedom, and choice in video games discussed in Chapter Two. Qualitative research on this subject is rare, but Seif El- Nasr et al. asked eleven participants about their experience with the experimental video game *Façade*. The researchers discovered that participants did not so much use generic conventions to define perceptions of control in *Façade*, but rather emphasized that they went into the experience with preconceived notions of gameplay based on the genres they played, and were ultimately let down when they played *Façade* as a result (47). Comparatively, as evidenced by the above quote from Participant 27-M, my participants discussed generic conventions to explain the phenomenon of control as opposed to explaining that they tried to play *Skyrim* like it was a certain genre (since they all knew it was a sandbox game).

Compared to other genres, sandbox games are generally designed to be played for years rather than months. This longevity is directly linked to profits. Bethesda's *Skyrim* was released in 2011 and has sold at least 20 million copies, although this number could be much higher.[9] Rockstar's *Grand Theft Auto 5* was released in 2012 and has topped 100 million in sales.[10] As recently as February 2019, *Grand Theft Auto 5* still cracks the top 10 games played on Steam.[11] Mojang's *Minecraft* was released in 2009 and has sold a staggering 144 million copies.[12] While these games already provide a lot of content, this content will stagnate just like any other genre. To extend the game's shelf life, more will have to be added. Sometimes this comes through official DLC, but this is not enough for many gamers and the solution is mods. Mods enhance perceptions of control in two ways. First, they enhance perceptions through the sheer quantity of mods that are available for download (usually thousands). Second, the gamer is quite literally in control over the modded content that they can include in their game to enhance the experience.

Chapter Three first uses *The Stanley Parable* to demonstrate that even the most restrictive games offer freedom to gamers. Next, this chapter addresses game design to show that expectations of control depend on generic conventions that involve narrative, aesthetic, and gameplay options coded into the game. For example, an on rails visual novel like *Doki Doki Literature Club* will have fewer choice options than a sandbox game like *Grand Theft Auto 5*. Regardless of genre, the code of every video game is a "locked door" that "is a physical constraint on the liberty of someone to enter some space" (Lessig 82). Despite these constraints, I argue that control is perceived to be greater in sandbox games due to the array of choices

[9] See https://www.gamespot.com/articles/millions-still-play-skyrim-every-month-todd-howard/1100-6460286/.
[10] See https://screenrant.com/grand-theft-auto-5-copies-sold-100-million/.
[11] See https://store.steampowered.com/stats/.
[12] See https://www.vg247.com/2018/01/23/minecraft-has-sold-over-144-million-copies-and-has-75-million-monthly-active-users/.

available to gamers over dozens or even hundreds of hours of gameplay. For some gamers, more freedom is not enough, and video game mods currently represent a way to manipulate Lessig's door metaphor, even if they are working with toolkits and restraints afforded to them. If modders have not entered the developer's space to give fellow gamers more control over their experience, at the very least, they have certainly written amusing graffiti over the door that sometimes calls more attention to the mods rather than the base game. These mods often breathe new life into an extant video game well beyond its life cycle by providing gamers with previously unavailable aesthetic, gameplay, and narrative options that might create new attitudes and gamer experiences.

However, greater control comes at a price. This chapter demonstrates that modding is a form of remixing that enhances perceptions of control when mods are reliant on another entity's intellectual property. There is a labor element of mods akin to remixing that makes sandbox games in particular successful. Yet some games usually do not need mods if they are more focused, such as on rails or narrative games that do not lend themselves well to modding tools. Other games might have such a clearly defined objective as evidenced by comprehensive game design that a mod might become a distraction. For these reasons, mods are more prevalent in sandbox games.

The result is an interesting dynamic in these games between game design and player perceptions of control. By promoting an entire game on the premise that "you can do anything," a company essentially proclaims that their game will always feel incomplete, and mods might become necessary to enhance player perceptions of control once the original experience stagnates. However, gamers willingly participate in this relationship with the corporation since they are still playing these games years after they hit the market. As vital as perceptions of

control are to a gaming experience, if mods are utilized in games that lend themselves well to modding tools, the gamer 1) may become reliant on mods to the point that the vanilla game cannot replicate the same experiences, or 2) must find other mods when even those mods begin to stagnate. Essentially, mods allow sandbox games to be remixed to the point that developers usually do not have to lift a finger to assist and can just watch as their game continues to be played beyond its life cycle. These notions will be explored in the next chapter's play study as more experienced sandbox gamers who were more likely to use mods noted that mods fixed the game or provided something unique that made the game worth playing again.

Perceptions of Control Exist in Even the Most Restrictive Games

"This was exactly the way, right now, that things were meant to happen." – The Stanley Parable

All gamers have their favorite games that have developed over years of courtship from multiple video game corporations. In many respects, a gamer and a developer, designer, studio, or publishing company are locked into a special relationship wherein the gamer will continue to consume titles so long as the games deliver on certain expectations and/or promises. Yet the paradox between agency and the illusion of choice is an obstacle to video game autonomy for practical reasons. For one, a video game is a colossal undertaking that requires time, effort, mastery of coding languages, and money. Especially when publishers push for deadlines, the perception of how a project is envisioned might ultimately result in tempered expectations if the reality is that the resources necessary to produce gaming options like fundamentally different story arcs are not possible. However, as games continue to become more cutting-edge in terms of graphics, technology, gameplay mechanics, and even narratives, a prevailing expectation is that

games usually will be designed with choices in mind that speak to a gamer's preferences and playing styles.

Choices can come in many forms in video games, and as was noted by Espen Aarseth in Chapter One, video games will have some combination of a World, Agents/Characters, Objects, and Events (2). These choices are generally linked to aesthetics, narratives, or gameplay mechanics. For example, a gamer may have the option of creating a gendered character who can wear various suits of armor onto the battlefield. Further, most games will inform the gamer that there is usually more than one way to advance in the game, whether in terms of interacting with the narrative or the game's mechanics. Additionally, some games might even allow the gamer to witness a completely different ending if one playthrough happens to be dissimilar to a previous one.

These choices occasionally produce conflict in that the freedoms granted to gamers outlined in Chapter Two showcase differences between narrative and gameplay choices. However, Aarseth notes that the two are not necessary at odds:

> The removal of agency is not a measure of narrativity, even if it is compatible with story production. This also means that a linear world cannot be classified as "more narrative" than an open-field one, or that games with limited player-object agency by necessity are more narrative than others. It merely means that linear-world, static, object systems pose fewer challenges to ludo-narrative projects. (5)

Arguably, video games work best when they combine these elements in unique ways to challenge conventions of storytelling and gameplay mechanics. Central to these elements is the

sense of freedom granted to the gamer, even if a game possesses a tight narrative that is outside the gamer's complete sense of agency. Although Chapter Two clearly states that free will is at best compatibilistic in games (digital compatibilism), freedom provides the necessary nuance of what is within the gamer's control to act upon, compared to free will that operates under the notion that one could have done otherwise.

In some cases, these perceptions of freedom become the narrative. An excellent example of this relationship between freedom and the game's code is the Galactic Café's hit walking simulator *The Stanley Parable*. When the gamer takes control of a first-person entity named Stanley, an omniscient yet condescending narrator guides them on a journey as Stanley discovers why his boss and coworkers are nowhere to be found. After diligently listening to all the narrator's directions, Stanley turns off his nefarious company's secret mind control device and enters a beautiful world of new possibilities as the narrator proclaims, "This was exactly the way, right now, that things were meant to happen. And Stanley was happy" (Galactic Café). The ending in which Stanley (through the gamer) finds happiness by shutting down a mind control device is one in which he essentially forfeits all autonomy by specifically following all directions from an external force.

The narrator is not as forgiving when the gamer opts to veer off course and attempts to unlock one of the nineteen total endings in the game. Among many of the noteworthy panoptic examples, the narrator will chastise the gamer (through Stanley) that this is not the right way to play, will tell Stanley to get back on course, or will even change the story completely if things diverge too much from the ending the narrator intended. If the narrator's storyline really goes off the rails, he will begin to acknowledge that the player, not Stanley, is the one responsible for all

this mischief. No matter what choices the gamer makes, the narrator will have the final say, and the game will restart back in Stanley's office located at the beginning of the game.

In a delightfully frustrating way, *The Stanley Parable* proves that freedom exists in video games. The gamer can exercise some degree of choice in that they can explore Stanley's workplace until the narrator decides he has had enough. Also unique to agency and *The Stanley Parable* is the concept of interactivity wherein a principle of interactivity is that interactive media will usual have some sort of feedback system. Eichner elaborates on this idea and writes, "The potential of traditional media such as newspaper, television or radio is thus considered to have low interactivity potential, since they are constructed as one-way media, while the internet or video games are considered to have high potential for interactivity, since they contain a feedback channel" (60). The feedback channel observed in *The Stanley Parable* is the narrator who not only guides the flow of the story, but also chastises the gamer when they happen to make what is perceived to be the wrong decision. While the feedback channel in *The Stanley Parable* explicitly informs the gamer what to do, it also exists to allow for multiple reactive outcomes to develop based on the gamer's actions. Whether or not behavior is altered is up the gamer, but the narrator will always make his "suggestions" known. However, in order to receive those suggestions, the gamer will have to act on their own accord.

The Stanley Parable also allows the gamer to evaluate choices in order to see as many of the nineteen endings as possible depending on the requisite steps. Many endings are unique because the game operates so that revisiting past locations while on a current trajectory is not possible (i.e. previous doors will prove to be inaccessible). More importantly, nineteen endings mean the gamer will have to play the game in nineteen different ways if they wish to see all

endings. *The Stanley Parable* also requires intention because the action in the game very clearly requires the gamer to act since the game couldn't progress without an action. Lastly, *The Stanley Parable* invites creativity as the gamer can at least manipulate the story to whittle some power away from the narrator. Perceptions of control are unique to game design, and *The Stanley Parable* belongs to a very specific genre in which walking and listening to feedback are the primary goals. As game design continues to push the boundaries of the affordances of choices that are essential in video games, it is worth exploring how genres contribute to these perceptions and expectations.

Video Game Perceptions of Control and Game Design Through Genre

Gaming experience must be broached from the standpoint of game design because one's experience with a video game can be linked to the decisions they are asked to make in the game. This section will link control to the combination of narrative, aesthetic, and gameplay mechanics that are incorporated into any video game. Without question, the manners in which these choices are presented to gamers is a fundamental component of game design. More importantly, these choices are presented using video game genres and generic conventions. According to Salen and Zimmerman, interactivity provides the necessary tools for gamers to make "choices within a game system designed to support actions and outcomes in meaningful ways" (58). Player perceptions of control through interactivity and decision-making are, therefore, strongly influenced by good game design because "designers focus their efforts on those game elements that they have control over— essentially, the characteristics and content of the games they produce" (Schumann et al. 548). According to Richard Rouse III, "Game design is narrowly

defined as the creation of the interactive elements of a game, the rule sets, the gameplay dynamics and systems that run the input-output loops of any game experience" (83). It does not matter if a game is designed by one individual or an entire team. Good game design will always require a process that articulates achievable outcomes. Of course, like all strategic plans, a game might run into occasional problems. Ultimately, it is vital "to follow the recipe, but be mindful that it will have to change, especially if something doesn't go right" (Rogers 66). Finally, Michael Sellers notes, "In either case, [designers] must devise ways to make a set of tasks immediately attractive and appealing enough to hold the player's attention" (17). As evidenced by all three of these definitions, a game's design might be a system of rules, a recipe, or even a framework of necessities to give the gamer some incentive to play in the first place.

As game design becomes more advanced, perceived control might be heightened by aesthetic, gameplay, and narrative choices within the virtual world. These three choice sets are especially prevalent in open world, sandbox video games like *Grand Theft Auto*, *The Elder Scrolls*, and *World of Warcraft* that allow for ample opportunities for exploration. Aesthetic choices allow the gamer to manipulate customization features that have been included in the game for the gamer to create a character, or at least grant them features like unique outfits, equipment, and hairstyles. These aesthetic features are sometimes regulated so that a character's gender has already been established (i.e. *Grand Theft Auto 5* or the *Tekken* series to name a few), but other series like *Mass Effect* invite the gamer to choose the protagonist's gender, although many video games still operate under the assumption of sexual binaries. Nevertheless, character aesthetics are generally quite popular in video games because these customizable options invite gamers to create avatars that they would enjoy playing for long stretches of time.

Video games also allow for gameplay choices that impact how a gamer chooses to play the game based on what the rule system permits. For example, popular action games usually allow gamers the option to play cautiously to reach objectives, or they might throw caution to the wind as they try to take on multiple opponents at once (a strategy that is certainly not recommended in the real world). These gameplay choices are usually broadly defined in accordance with various gaming predilections so that gamers may choose games from available genres based on the amount of control that the game's design allows.

Most important to this present analysis are narrative choices that exist to progress the story or reveal information about the virtual world. Unsurprisingly, there is an entire field of literary criticism devoted to structures, functions, and themes of narratives. At its most basic, narratology is a structuralist approach concerned with how stories are arranged, and a narratologist believes that all stories share basic conventions like plot, theme, symbolism, and characters. According to Seymour Chatman, a narratologist might be concerned with asking, "What can we say about the way structures like narrative organize themselves? . . . What are the ways in which we recognize the presence of absence of a narrator? What is plot? Character? Setting? Point of view?" (18-19). Chatman also suggests that all narratives are composed of two features, which are "a story (histoire), the content or chain of events (actions, happenings), plus what may be called the existents (characters, items of setting); and a discourse (discours), that is, the expression, the means by which the content is communicated. In simple terms, the story is the what in a narrative that is depicted, discourse the how" (19). Narratology posits that all stories will have some semblance of a plot influenced by causes and effects (see determinism), which are in turn initiated by an agent or process. The second component of this claim mandates

that the story must be presented in some manner, which might include oral retellings, written texts, or representations on some sort of screen or interface.

Narratives can be essential or unnecessary depending on the game, but narrative control from a game design standpoint is often dismissed in favor of gameplay mechanics for games that are not visual novels. Rogers privileges gameplay over narratives and states, "The best rule of thumb is to always make the story be in service of the gameplay and not the other way around" (52). Coincidentally, this approach is opposite to other media as the story generally comes first. Designer Jordan Mechner also prioritizes gameplay over story as evidenced by "*The Sands of Time*: Crafting a Video Game Story." While dialogue and storyboarding are relatively cheap elements in a game, "Programming, by contrast, is one of the most expensive—not because programmers get paid so much, but because a programming delay takes everyone's time" (118). Resource allocation usually determines what the final design of the game might resemble, including what control is afforded to the gamer. This impacts how the game's choices will be configured into the game if the reality of the financial investments of the project begins to trump the initial expectations of delivery to ensure the core objectives remain in place. Game design will usually consist of some combination of gameplay, aesthetic, and narrative options, which will be predicated on what type of game the designer envisions. These arrangements of choices are in turn influenced by the game's suggested genre. At face value, the definition of genre is easily recognized:

> Genre in literature can be, for example, that of a detective story, and a genre in cinema can be, for example, that of a western. These are established genres of narrative arts, based on the typical characters, milieu and stylistic conventions and perhaps most

> importantly, on similar storylines shared by those works that belong to a particular genre. (Mäyrä 69)

However, video game genres are more complicated in part due to these gameplay, aesthetic, and narrative combinations because the conventions are not always the same compared to other media. Earnest Adams writes, "A genre is a category of games characterized by a particular set of challenges regardless of setting or game-world content" (70). For example, an action-adventure game could be a 2D Japanese platformer, or it could be an open world Western video game. If Adams' definition holds, what keeps both games within the same genre would be how the challenges and gameplay preserve the gamer's involvement in achieving the goal.

At the heart of game design is how much control a gamer perceives to have in the experience. Indeed, a major criterion for analyzing video game genres is to first address how gamers are asked to interact with the game through these perceptions of control. Mark J. Wolf refers to this sense of interactivity as the game's primary objective and writes, "The game's objective is a motivational force for the player, and this, combined with the various forms of interactivity present in the game, are useful places to start in building a set of video game genres" (260). Ultimately, a discussion on genre is a way to gauge what is indispensable to the overall structure of any game. At the very least, an analysis of genre allows for a narrowing of the relationship between concepts like narrative and player engagement since comparing genres will allow a researcher "to realize that many concepts that are very useful for describing one game can be rather useless when describing another" (Mäyrä 3). For example, from a narrative standpoint, James Wallis notes that a "game's mechanics must take into consideration the rules of the genre that it is trying to create: not just the relevant icons and tropes, but the nature of a

story from that genre" (73). Wallis' statement points to the relationship between games and stories in that some gamers desire great narratives, but player agency also must be factored in to a certain extent (further, some games, like *Tetris*, will not even have a narrative). Ultimately, if we evaluate the importance of player perceptions of control, we will first need to find corresponding genres based on the level of agency afforded by said game genre.

Genres and Control: From On-Rails to the Sandbox

Identifying all aspects of video game genres and conventions is outside the scope of this chapter and dissertation. For the purposes of this analysis, I will be building on an interview with Participant 27-M from my play study who played the modded version of *Skyrim*. This participant used the word "spectrum" to describe perceptions of control as they were addressing genre conventions. While I cannot create an exhaustive list of genres and conventions, I can provide a list of games with features and objectives that might form a preliminary spectrum of video games that demonstrate perceptions of control that impact gamer experience.

Even a preliminary spectrum of certain video games can demonstrate the progression of a gamer explicitly told by the video game that they have no control to perceived full control that suggests their actions ultimately matter. The first category comprises games like the visual novel *Doki Doki Literature Club* by Dan Salvato. *Doki Doki Literature Club*'s recent status as well as its subversion of typical generic conventions makes it worthwhile to include in this analysis. The game begins as a high school male protagonist joins a literature club after his best friend Sayori forces him to. The game is initially perceived to be a cliché Japanese visual novel dating

simulator wherein the gamer courts four beautiful young women. Courting occurs once the gamer is prompted to choose specific words that excite the targeted chibi (small Japanese caricatures) girls on the screen. Unfortunately, all choices lead to the same outcome in *Doki Doki Literature Club*. The game slowly becomes a psychological thriller as three of the girls are killed off by the fourth, Monika, who becomes self-aware of her existence as a video game character before she declares her love for the gamer, and not the avatar. As the gamer continues to "play" the game, they realize that there is one true path: "Just Monika." Equally frustrating and brilliant, *Doki Doki Literature Club* demonstrates that no matter what a player attempts to do within the game, the code will remind them that many of their choices are insignificant.

A second classification of games invites gamers to explore a virtual environment in a somewhat restricted setting (i.e. a single town or city). In narrative-heavy games like the Japanese *Persona* series developed by Atlus (a general description of *Persona* is dungeon-crawler RPG meets visual novel dating simulator), the scale of the setting is reduced, which allows gamers to spend their days interacting with emotionally-complex interpersonal non-playable characters (NPCs), or fighting demons in dungeons. However, time in the game is finite as evidenced by the in-game calendar utilized in the third, fourth, and fifth installments. Perceptions of control are not measured by each game's main narrative, which will ultimately end in a specified manner, but by how gamers manage their time during any given day. In other words, while the main quest will not be altered, side quests can reveal new parts of the world in various order, and new activities or experiences might be awarded to the gamer for their decisions.

Using a similarly localized environment as *Persona*, video games like Dontnod's *Life Is Strange* discussed in Chapter Two were designed explicitly with player-motivated choices in mind, unlike a game like *BioShock* also analyzed in the second chapter that cares very little about player-motivated choices. Unlike *Persona*, there is neither a combat system nor a leveling up system seen in role-play games. *Life Is Strange* is a game about making character choices. Some of the choices are simple, such as watering a plant in a dorm room (the gamer plays as Maxine Caulfield). However, other choices are much more difficult, such as preventing Max's friend from committing suicide after a video of her at a party goes viral. Choices in *Life Is Strange* can stick with the gamer after a decision has been made, but should a gamer feel like they made the wrong decision, in this game they may (in most cases) rewind time to test out a different outcome, providing a sense that they perhaps could have chosen to do otherwise. Ultimately, the various choices in *Life Is Strange*, small and large, even if they seem unimportant or irrelevant to the ending, are still part of an overall tapestry of the game, which informs the audience who Max is as a person (as well as about the NPCs in the game). In the end, perhaps everything in the game matters, especially if gamers are asked to think about why they made decisions in the first place as evidenced by de Miranda's "*Life Is Strange* and 'Games Are Made.'" However, despite what *Life Is Strange* can teach gamers about empathy, all decisions made throughout the game will lead to a binary ending, culminating in an experience that might weaken perceptions of gamer control.

As evidenced by the analysis of *Persona* and *Life Is Strange*, game choices are made possible because the designers deliberately chose to limit the scale of the environment, thereby emphasizing the importance of talking to characters in these games. By scaling back on the size

of the virtual worlds, designers provided the ability for gamers to practice skills like empathy, which can impact narrative and gameplay decision-making. As suggested by Karen Schrier, "This has important implications for designing and using games to enable people to practice ethics, in that people may be less likely to employ empathy-related skills and thought processes until they have had the time and experience to build relationships with the characters" (56). While it might be possible to design for empathetic choice in a game using a large world, a smaller environment arguably will allow for an easier possibility of implementing unique characterization. In other words, this design choice will emphasize the characters who belong to and contribute to the virtual world as opposed to focusing on the environment itself.

Games like *Persona* and *Life Is Strange* make the game world smaller and more centralized. Other games increase the scale of the environment. Fourth on the spectrum includes games like the original *Mass Effect Trilogy*. While perhaps not as emotionally-draining as some of the choices made in *Life Is Strange*, *Mass Effect* is unique for its dialogue trees that can guide a gamer's decisions over three unique games (provided the gamer saved their progress). Sebastian Domsch suggests, however, that dialogue trees can be somewhat limiting and writes, "Dialogue trees imply consequences for what the character says, though this frequently is not really the case. Especially in the case of cyclical dialogue trees, they are often little more than a way to provide information to the player, some of which she might need for later decisions, and some not" (40). In many cases, dialogue trees in contemporary video games suggest considerable narrative choice in the game world. *Mass Effect* exploited this feature, and many choices made in one game actually did produce tangible consequences in others, or at the very least produced intriguing transformations. Had this method of storytelling continued over additional

installments, the illusion of agency might be analyzed even more intricately in *Mass Effect*. Eventually, however, like *Life Is Strange*, *Mass Effect 3* concludes in a manner that was predetermined despite suggestions that a gamer's actions would produce mutually-exclusive outcomes. In addition to game economics, coding narrative options into games is usually a laborious process, and *Mass Effect 3* succumbed to this reality. Such was the case for BioWare designer Casey Hudson in an interview with David S. Heineman as he describes just one influential mission in *Mass Effect 3* about the alien krogan race and the Genophage that rendered the species infertile:

> It was a really interesting situation to put the player in, but for us it was something that we had reviewed over and over again in these sort of dailies. We would talk about things like "Okay, at this point currently we're not offering that" or "What if I wanted to as a question here?" or "What if I wanted to come clean at this point?" (199)

Mass Effect is one such series that prided itself on narrative control to captivate gamers. If daily meetings were required for narrative options in just one mission, this scenario should provide some perspective on how painstaking it is to code these choices in hopes of promoting player agency in a complete game. BioWare assured gamers that choices they made throughout all three games would impact the trilogy's ending, but all gamers were given a pre-defined ending with disregard for any of their choices made in each game. The outcry was so severe that BioWare extended the ending through downloadable content (DLC). This was the closest thing to a consolation prize fans would receive. Despite the promises of players controlling their own experience, *Mass Effect 3* is a reminder of what happens when ambitious narratives meet enforced deadlines.

Each of these four types of games in the spectrum will either explicitly inform the gamer that they have no control, or the developer will break the illusion of control and remind the gamer that they are Lessig's "invisible hand" guiding the gamer. During such examples of "lockdown" gameplay, "the designer decides to force the game/story to turn out his or her way, which means preventing the player from taking any actions that might potentially de-rail it" (Tanenbaum 4). Lockdown is observed when a game forces a particular quest or mission, initiates a cutscene, or inhibits input from the gamer. Some examples of lockdown gameplay are benign while others produce "a fundamental distrust of the player to electively take the action that will advance the story. Rather than providing the player with insight into what action is desired, the designer simply forces desired actions as needed" (Tanenbaum 4). Lockdown may be praised if the designer is upfront with gamers that they have no control as is the case with *Doki Doki Literature Club*, or it can produce a vitriolic response if fans feel that they were deceived.

However, the opposite of lockdown gameplay is the sandbox where "the designer decides to subtract his or her authorial voice from the system as much as possible, and emphasize the player's ability to act freely within the simulated world" (Tanenbaum 4). In these games, the gamer, in many instances, is offered some semblance of a main narrative, but after an objective is achieved, the gamer is allowed considerable flexibility to interact with the game based on their predilections. For example, gamers may feel the urge to become skillful at virtual golf and tennis in *Grand Theft Auto 5* rather than steal cars or progress the story. Additionally, if gamers feel that *Skyrim* does not address their cheese needs, they can collect as many cheeses available in Tamriel as they desire. The inexperienced Participant 3-U may not have spent their hour

collecting cheese in *Skyrim* for my play study, but they recognized the scale of the world despite no previous experience with the game:

> It was very fun. You can tell right off the bat that there's a lot of things to do. There's not just one set of things that you can focus on. Like, you saw the clothes they can wear, and, uh, all the levels you can gain. All the stories, all the side quests that they offer you. Like, you kept getting optional quests versus the story. For me, that's fun because it's basically a very, very long infinite game if you want it to [be], especially with the Season Pass that they add on games nowadays. So, for me, it was fun.

The appeal of the sandbox world in just one hour of play was enough for Participant 3-U to proclaim, "I'll definitely try to play it now." Unlike other games mentioned previously, sandbox video games, while usually containing some impression of a main narrative, generally produce enjoyment from multiple other features available in the game alluded to by Participant 3-U. Consistent themes of sandbox games are a lax set of game-specific goals, a large open world that encourages exploration, and, above all else, a sense of freedom that encourages unstructured play (Kulman). Therefore, sandbox video games might produce the greatest level of perceived control among their respective audiences because "by inviting players to invent their own goals and roles in a game, the designer necessarily must cede more control to the players, and emergent behaviors can result that were not intended in the original design" (Falstein 232). Whereas the onus of game design is on the designer for games that will have more lockdown features, the perception is gamers are responsible for their objectives in a sandbox game so that "the game is working on carrying out his orders" (Bates 75). In fact, sandbox games in general usually do not have clearly defined objectives since a clear goal would share similarities with other genres,

including strategy games (Bates 75). Such is the case for a sandbox game like *Second Life* that does not outline its goals or objectives, thus encouraging its fan base to manipulate the game world as they see fit (Brookey and Cannon 145).

Sandbox games are sprawling and ambitious, but they often do not live up to player expectations, or they cannot satisfy certain needs (Tanenbaum and Bizzocchi 17). The design of sandbox video games can even reveal "poor implementation and unfulfilled promises" (Tanenbaum and Bizzocchi 18). However, these games tend to be popular and have expanded shelf lives compared to other genres (for example, *Skyrim* is seven years old, but gamers are still playing it). This is due in large part to video game modifications (mods) that users create, share, and download for their own amusement. Mods, particularly in sandbox games, might be the next best available video game phenomenon for scholars to explore should they be interested in perceptions of control from the perspectives of gamers.

Mods as Remix Culture and the Commodification of Control in Sandbox Games

If choices and game design go together, an effective mod is more than capable of impacting user perceptions of control. In terms of aesthetics, talented modders have created thousands of armor, weapon, and character customization add-ons that often rival (or outright replace) the contributions of the official team of programmers. Additionally, modders have developed aesthetic mods that improve visual and audio standards that force some gamers to declare that they can no longer play the vanilla version of *Skyrim*. In terms of gameplay mods, modders have created mods that change how battles are fought and how gamers level up. For

example, the popular "Ordinator" mod produces hundreds of new "perks" that can be allocated as the gamer levels up in *Skyrim*. For the purposes of this study, the narrative options afforded to players in *Skyrim* are worth extensive analysis. Using Alexander Unger's definitions cited in the first chapter, narrative add-ons in *Skyrim* allow gamers access to new dialogue options in the world as well as entirely new companions (including "Sofia," "Inigo," and "Interesting NPCs") with whom to travel if they are bored with their vanilla options. Story "mods" are so expansive in the *Skyrim* community that they can be larger than official downloadable content (DLC) released after vanilla software begins to stagnate. Although Arthmoor's "Alternate Start" is one such mod, several others open a part of the world that previously did not exist! Such mods include the impressive "Falskaar," "Moonpath to Elsweyr," and "Beyond *Skyrim*: Bruma" story quests that can take several hours to complete. Finally, there are total conversion narrative *Skyrim* mods like "Enderal" that essentially become their own unique games.[13] With so many additional narrative, aesthetic, and gameplay options available, gamers can interact with these virtual worlds in manners that may not have been intended by the programmers overseeing the original deterministic software, thus providing opportunities to address perceived control in these modified games. This heightened sense of choice awareness was not lost on many participants in the play study, including Participant 13-U who disclosed that they made the transition to modded *Skyrim*:

> Well, technically in video games, there aren't infinite choices, right? If you really wanted to, count out every single thing you could do in *Skyrim*, and every single way to accomplish it, and it would be some obscenely large number of different ways you could

[13] See https://kotaku.com/enderal-is-more-than-a-mod-it-s-a-whole-new-skyrim-1785370151.

> play *Skyrim*. But there's still a number there. But with mods, you can't really ascribe a number to that, because if you ever wanted to do something in the game, say, "Oh, I want to go over there," it might not be possible in *Skyrim*, but a mod will, assuming someone has the power to create the mod and implement it, which for games like *Skyrim* is pretty easy, all of a sudden, you have unlimited choices.

Assuming gamers have the hardware required to run mods, there are virtually infinite options available to gamers in games that allow mods, meaning there are possibilities for infinite user experiences as well.

Ultimately, there is a commodified labor component in sandbox games that has made them particularly successful in promoting these seemingly infinite possibilities. Unofficial game designers create this commodity. In "Game Modding, Prosumerism, and Neoliberal Labor Practices," Renyi Hong claims that *Skyrim* already had 800 mods after its first week in 2011, and that "numerous game publications would praise the creativity and expertise of *Skyrim* modders, acknowledging their ingenuity in improving the game" (984). Hong also points out that Bethesda's own executive producer, Todd Howard, once claimed of video game companies that do not provide mod support, "I don't understand why they don't, I think it makes your games better" (987). Hong's argument is that video game mods adhere to certain principles of neoliberalism, or "an economic regime that privileges entrepreneurial and market freedoms, supports deregulation and strong property rights, and opposes state intervention in the market" (986). In Hong's estimation, these free market economic principles grant modders broad motivations that include getting noticed by large companies and even personal creative expression (991-993). However, neoliberalism is not without criticism. For one, neoliberalism

can promote inequality because "people can exercise choice through spending. But some have more to spend than others" (Monbiot). Neoliberalism also "redefines citizens as consumers, whose democratic choices are best exercised by buying and selling, a process that rewards merit and punishes inefficiency" (Monbiot). Finally, neoliberalism has also been accused of shirking responsibility as proponents generally believe that their only responsibility is to increase profits. Economist Milton Friedman quite literally penned a 1970 article titled "The Social Responsibility of Business is to Increase its Profits" in which he controversially claims "'there is one and only one social responsibility of business—to use its resources and engage in activities designed to increase its profits so long as it stays within the rules of the game, which is to say, engages in open and free competition without deception or fraud'" (6).

Importantly, mods are the framework of this dissertation, not neoliberalism. While neoliberalism is a policy linked to mods, policies do not necessarily have to be formal or explicit (nor are they step-by-step instructions). However, policies can influence interactions between parties as appears to be the case when users subscribe to terms of service (TOS) to make mods for games that are in competitive markets. If mods are viewed as company policy depending on a company's TOS, it should come as no surprise that they can increase a game's lifespan. For example, gamers are still buying *Skyrim* since it has been re-released on multiple systems, causing executive producer Todd Howard to joke, "If you want us to stop releasing it, stop buying it."[14] In the same breath, Howard notes that the goal for Bethesda is corporate

[14] See https://www.ign.com/articles/2018/07/10/todd-howard-if-you-want-us-to-stop-releasing-skyrim-ports-stop-buying-them.

sustainability. Even if *Skyrim* is a great game, it is hard to imagine that mods created by unofficial modders do not have an impact on this business model.

This relationship between modders and video game companies raises the question why modders willingly use their skills to mod an existing game rather than make a new game entirely. Although there are many reasons for modding, many modders want to build a digital portfolio or supplement income. Video game companies hire programmers and designers with experience, so "starting as an independent game modder is the easiest way to determine whether one has the skill, disposition, and commitment to make games, even without a job to do so" (Scacchi). Some modders have used their modding backgrounds to land jobs as was the case for Alexander Velicky who designed *Skyrim's* popular "Falskaar" mod. Although Velicky made the mod specifically for Bethesda, he was eventually hired by Bungie as an associate designer.[15] Some modders use sites like Patreon, which is murky territory if modders are working with extant intellectual property. For example, Brazilian modder Julio Schwab has profited from *Grand Theft Auto 5* mods based on Marvel characters. Many people might worry about legal action, but Schwab contends that his mods result in greater profits for Rockstar (Wiltshire). Other modders, like Ryan Racioppo of *DOTA 2* fame, keep track of trends, such as his popularity decreasing 12% between 2017 and 2018 (Wiltshire). Other modders are vehement that they should be compensated for their work, as was the argument made by Shawn "FMPONE" Snelling in a 2015 *PC Gamer* article titled "I'm a Modder. I Deserve Compensation."

Whatever the motivations are for modders, mods have helped usher in a digital remix culture that "has historically been free of regulation" since "copyright, historically, has been

[15] See https://www.engadget.com/2013/11/30/19-year-old-skyrim-falskaar-modder-lands-gig-at-bungie/.

focused on commercial life. It has left the noncommercial, or beyond commercial, creativity free of legal regulation" (Lessig 194). A remix culture "is contrasted with a read only culture in which a small group of professionals produce culture for everyone else. A remix culture is a read/write culture" (Duncum 10). By its very definition a remix adds, alters, or otherwise modifies an extant media form. Mods are part of this remix culture because "modded games are not stand–alone systems, as they require the user to have an originally acquired or authorized copy of the unmodded game" (Scacchi). This means that "understanding game mods starts from observing how players interact with and reconfigure the game embodiments at their disposal" (Scacchi). It stands to reason that the practice of modding has produced a commodity that, if Todd Howards' earlier quotes are any indication, primarily favors video game companies over the modders. This is not to make a claim about unfair business practices or the rights of modders, but there is commodification in modding as a form of remix culture. The commodity for sandbox video games is the perception of individual control to produce unique in-game freedom experiences that may not have otherwise been created by the official developer. In sandbox games, this is achieved through remixing the vanilla game with user-generated mods.

It is important to note that modding can be limiting compared to other media forms in a remix culture since mods rely on an existing game or engine. Mods might be defined as "restrictive remixes" that "are mash-ups or other kinds of recombinatory works that consciously follow or deploy predetermined rules, templates, or algorithms in the creation of new texts" (Edwards 31). All remixes are constrained by an extant product, but music production provides an interesting parallel for the differences between official and unofficial remixes. A musical remix is an officially licensed track that was released with permission while a bootleg is an

unofficial remix that was not granted permission.[16] This distinction for mods as restrictive remixes is important because despite the presumption that all mods are similar from a legal perspective, certain games (especially sandbox games) grant the status of "official mod support." When this occurs, a game studio personally "[offers] game products and services that users can mod. At the same time, studios seek to control access to the core IP that enables game play and modification" (Scacchi). However, this permission generally does not include the game engine, or "a large software program infrastructure that coordinates computer graphics, user interface controls, networking, game audio, access to middleware libraries for game physics, and so forth" (Scacchi). These tools have been granted and promoted by such companies as Bethesda, but other companies like Rockstar do not endorse modding, meaning all Rockstar mods might be considered bootlegs despite their popularity. However, Rockstar usually turns a blind eye so that mods may exist, which only promotes assertions from modders like Schwab that Rockstar does not mind if their profits are not impacted negatively (or the corporations just have not found him yet).

Ultimately, perceptions of control are enhanced through mods that remix base sandbox games. In music, some remixes completely alter songs while others perhaps only provide minor changes. Yet the original song is modified to the point that it is different (some remixes are more popular than the originals). However, all remixes are based on specific songs. Similarly, mods adhere to the same principle wherein even the most successful mods rely on another entity's intellectual property or official toolkits. Further, modded codes cannot be easily transferred between games, ports, or system updates as was my case with the "Animated Aquilese Portraits"

[16] See http://marcfreccero.com/whats-the-difference-between-a-remix-and-bootleg/.

discussed in the preface. For example, *Skyrim* and *Skyrim Special Edition* are not the same game, so mod support is different for both games. Only total conversion mods can take on true lives of their own, but they are also built with previous games. However, since sandbox games are so expansive, designers and companies that produce these games often encourage modding to fix glitches or introduce new dynamics for extant gaming communities. In fact, some design teams often do not even have to lift a finger or use any of their own resources if talented modders take care of certain jobs for them. For example, a parallel to modding can be seen in *Second Life*, which provided options for certain users to either rebuke or restore traditional gender norms (Brookey and Cannon 160). Additionally, Bethesda gave Arthmoor a pat on the back in an official website interview for developing mods (without specified compensation) that enhanced the shelf life of *Skyrim* (Kretzschmar and Stanfill 8). This is consistent with the perception that modding sandbox programs like *Second Life* or *Skyrim* makes the experience better, which is supported by Nathaniel Poor's research as 96 of his modder participants either agreed or strongly agreed that they mod games to make them better for themselves (1257).

Sandbox games offer greater perceptions of control since most goals of these games are defined by the gamer. However, since sandbox games generally do not have a clear objective, they are more likely to suffer from flaws or omissions in the game design, which would require modding from amateur programmers to fix. In other words, sandbox games are more likely to be remixed with mods. The result is a peculiar dynamic in these games between great game design and player perceptions of control. By promoting an entire game on the premise that "you can do anything" to enhance a personal gaming experience, the company essentially admits that their game will always feel incomplete, will have to be remixed with mods to remain fresh, or requires

external support for improvement and enjoyment. It is as if the company states, "You can do anything because we did nothing beyond providing you with the initial skeleton to personalize enjoyment." Although this approach may seem magnanimous on the surface, by designing "less" to encourage "more," the design team knows that the gamer may have to download mods to enhance perceptions of control in such games before the experience stagnates.

It turns out that modding is a double-edge sword. On one hand, mods manipulate the base game to provide gamers with greater degrees of agency through more choice options, enhancing perceptions of control in the process. On the other hand, mods can manipulate players to extend the shelf lives of games that perhaps have outlived their usefulness. Modding is a creative enterprise and most modders should be praised for their contributions. However, if mods get stuck in this remix cycle, gamers may be forced to mod a sandbox game if they wish to keep playing to the point that they rely on them to enhance particular gaming experiences, and these mods may also have to be replaced by other mods when even these experiences become tiresome. In this context, mods might be described as the Pandora's Box of sandbox perceptions of control. After all, it is very hard to return to an unmodded state once a gamer's predilections evolve to the point that mods enhance their goals and the game beyond what the official development team was able to accomplish.

Conclusion

To recap Chapter Three, a video game's objective is usually influenced by its interactivity and genre. A genre is defined by a game's code and design, and "we can come to

know it through the playing of a game, as we notice what responses are given for what player actions, and what rules seem to govern the gameplay" (Wolf 24). This suggests that strong game design works alongside a strong objective. Recall that this chapter began by explaining that all gamers have established relationships with multiple games, series, and franchises. In many respects, modding reflects this relationship at its maximum level since modders pay homage to a work by taking the time to mod it. Advanced modders could use their talents to create their own games, but many opt instead to work specifically with games they love (usually to promote their own mods). However, games with perceived great design generally do not need to be modded. When they are, reactions are mixed. One such example is the *Doki Doki Literature Club* mod "A Brand New Day" that turns a psychological thriller into a harem anime. A little-known *Danganronpa* mod replaces all characters during trials with images of WWE professional wrestlers. While initially amusing, the voices remain the same, which produces a somewhat disappointing experience.

Many video game companies simply do not allow modding as they do not want gamers to tamper with their proprietary code. Successful sandbox games that are modded extend a game's shelf life. The more successful a modded game is, the more it will be remixed ad nauseum. However, I am not anti-remix culture. I enjoy my fair share of remixes and mods, and even believe remixing is necessary for the dissemination of media. However, as is the case with modding, someone eventually must write a new song rather than remixing the same one over and over on the dancefloor in order to promote innovation. Nevertheless, mods enhance player perceptions of control or else game companies would not see the value in agency as a commodity and would therefore render all mods illegal. How gamers articulate their relationships with or reactions to mods is addressed in the next chapter as my play study participants describe what it

means to have control in digital environments and how mods influence these observations in sandbox video games like *Skyrim*.

CHAPTER FOUR: FIRST PLAY STUDY RESULTS: WHAT CAN MODS IN A SANDBOX GAME REVEAL ABOUT PLAYER PERCEPTIONS OF CONTROL?

"It is much, much, much more enjoyable to play Skyrim after mods, mainly because Skyrim is such an old game now that a lot of the technical limitations and the annoying gameplay and bugs that they never got around to fixing, they sort of start to add up once you put time in the game. So modding those away and just starting with an ideal Skyrim state is always better than the original, in my opinion." – Play Study Participant 13-U

If user-generated mods represent another level of perceived interactivity in video games, how will mods change the experience of perceived control as compared to the official version of the game released by the video game studio? Aided by the push for qualitative research design in experimental philosophy analyzing ideas of agency among ordinary folk (gamers), the perceptions of control that are of interest to philosophers, psychologists, and video game scholars, and the allure of video game mods, my qualitative play study was able to shed some light on how gamers view modifications (in this case, narrative add-ons in sandbox games). This realization produced the first two findings in my play study. First, the chosen mods impacted the gaming experience and perceptions of control for participants who played *Skyrim* before. Common reported terms for what that impact was include interest, enjoyment, immersion, and adding something new to the experience. Second, mastery and experience with *Skyrim* determined if participants were not impacted by the mods, if they described mods as supplements to enhance the experience, or if they were essential to make the game better.

Play Study Findings on Enjoyment and Perceived Control

A common pattern among the participants (both modded and unmodded) was that perceptions of control were influenced by how much enjoyment participants derived from the experience. Participants with no prior experience with the game were impressed by the size and scope of the base game world; experienced players who played the modded version enjoyed playing with the mods; and experienced players who played the unmodded version addressed general critiques of vanilla *Skyrim* since they played through the game multiple times. Importantly, enjoyment is closely linked to perceptions of control in media studies since a greater perception of control influences gamer preferences, which in turn can enhance satisfaction (Rogers, Dillman Carpentier, Barnard 29). In fact, many participants who never played the game before expressed that they enjoyed the experience, even though they had no previous playthrough to which they could provide a comparison. Participants with prior experience who played the modded version in this play study were able to discuss the value of the mods after their playthroughs. Alternately, the participants who were familiar with *Skyrim* but did not play with the mods were able to describe their playthroughs through the absence of mods. These participants seemed matter-of-fact, disappointed, and bored in extreme cases when discussing their playthroughs. This suggests that the game itself was driving perceptions of control and enjoyment for those who never played *Skyrim* before, but mods were the primary motivating factor for those participants who had played before.

If participants never played before, the link between control and enjoyment seemed very high in the sandbox game because the world was completely new to them. However, for those who knew the game and were familiar with some of its mods (some even had a few favorite

mods that enhanced their satisfaction), the link between enjoyment and control was predominately influenced by the mods rather than what the base game could provide since it was viewed as more of the same. Put another way, inexperienced gamers found enjoyment by performing in activities that the base game already provided; experienced gamers who played the unmodded version primarily wanted to see how far they could get in their allotted time; and experienced gamers who played the modded version deliberately tried to find the mods to maximize their own amusement.

The Mod Outliers

Because these were qualitative interviews, participants were invited to explain what they experienced. Common expressions participants used to explain their experiences include interest, enjoyment, immersion, and adding something new to the experience. Fourteen participants played the modded version of *Skyrim* that featured the narrative add-on mods "Sofia," "Inigo," and "Interesting NPCs." Eight experienced participants were able to discuss how the mods impacted their playthroughs. One inexperienced player (Participant 20-M) stated that the mods impacted their experience. Five participants who had no previous experience with *Skyrim* did not report any changes, such as Participant 14-M who disclosed, "I feel like had I played like a non-modded version of the game first, I might be able to provide like more perspective on. . .how it was altered by interacting with the mods." Three of these six inexperienced participants activated a mod, but their reactions were divergent. Participant 24-M encountered two characters from the "Interesting NPCs" mod just by traveling along one of *Skyrim*'s roads and arriving at a remote location called Nightgate Inn. While there, the participant unwittingly talked to two modded

characters named Morris and Cullen, but the participant did not know that these were mods until after the interview. When pressed on this unique playthrough observation, Participant 24-M stated, "I just wanted to see what they were saying, honestly. I guess I kind of made the first one mad. The female, I just wanted to see more information about what she might have known because she had a lot of questions there that I could pick." The mods did not make much difference in their playthrough, but it is possible that this participant found these mods very well done and immersive within the game despite no prior knowledge that they were added by individuals not affiliated with Bethesda.

Like Participant 24-M, Participant 6-M had no previous experience with *Skyrim*, but they were aware that the character they encountered, Sofia, was a mod. However, when this participant discussed why they relieved Sofia from their service after the dragon fight near Whiterun Tower, they were merely testing her limits since this was their first time playing a sandbox video game. In their own words, "I looked at the choices when I talked to her that last time and I said, 'I wonder what would happen if I did this?' And that's what I picked. It was not more for, you know, I didn't need a character following me around kind of thing. It was more of an experiment of what would happen if I did that." For the participant, relieving Sofia from service was a way to test the code in the sandbox video game. There are several companions in *Skyrim*, and this participant probably could have experimented on any of them (if they encountered them) in a similar manner with the same outcomes.

Curiously, Participant 20-M claimed that the mods were a motivating factor in their playthrough: "[Sofia] was what made me want to go to Whiterun, because it would be something cool, something a little different. That's what made me want to see Inigo first, and then from the experience of seeing Inigo, I wanted to see what Sofia was about. So, I went to Whiterun." This

participant had no previous experience with *Skyrim* (although they played *Oblivion*). They enjoyed the Inigo mod, but due to lack of experience with *Skyrim*, the participant played in a manner consistent with others who did not play before. That said, mods were apparently on this participant's mind because they said returning to Whiterun after Riften was motivated by Sofia. In other words, their experience was the only one influenced by mods despite having no previous experience with the base game.

Finally, Participant 4-M had a noticeably lukewarm reaction consistent with perceptions of control and enjoyment previously discussed: "I wouldn't say that [the mods] impacted my experience that much. It felt just typically like playing *Skyrim*. Except that I kind of felt like a little bit like a failure for not getting to the companions that were in the game." This participant played a lot of *Skyrim* in the past, but might have been negatively impacted by the play session because they did not access the mods. Eventually, this participant's goal was to find the "Interesting NPCs" mod, but because they did not find much of the modded content (they almost recruited Inigo in Riften, but could not pick his cell lock), this experienced gamer felt like a failure. The experience felt like "typical *Skyrim*," and the participant was disappointed that they were unable to see anything new.

The Other Mod Participants

Although the above participants were outliers, their experiences provided comparisons for those who played the game in the past. Those familiar with *Skyrim* were able to explain how the mods impacted their playthroughs because they felt the mod(s) added something specific to their experience and increased their interest as a result. For some of these participants, that just

meant seeing what the mod had to offer in their hour. Such was the case for three of the eight gamers who had experience with *Skyrim*, because the mods provided something new that was intriguing to them since their last playthrough (all three participants noted that it had been a long time since they last played). For example, Participant 2-M enjoyed Sofia's humor and saw her as a way to break up tedium if they played the game for an extensive period of time:

> I really enjoyed playing with the modded character. I thought she was interesting. I thought she kind of added a little bit of comedic elements to this. I'm sure if I played this over 100 hours, and played every single port of it that came out—because there's, like, 20 different *Skyrim* ports—I'm pretty sure that having that extra character out there to just kind of provide her take on things or her little input would at least add little bit of something to it.

For this participant, the Sofia mod allowed them to see the game world differently and added some interesting comedy, dialogue, and command options unavailable in the vanilla game. The fact that she was a mod that someone unaffiliated with Bethesda created made this participant even more curious to test her limits. Testing Sofia's limits increased their interest level, and the fact that she was external to the game's existing code was amusing. Despite these findings, this participant did not seem to express any desire to go to Riften (where Inigo is) or any other location that might have featured more modded content.

Conversely, Participant 8-M rebutted Sofia's attempts at humor. Her target audience is composed of men seeking a flirtatious character with whom they can interact regularly, and this participant eventually stopped engaging with her as a character. However, the participant conceded that something piqued their interest about the Inigo mod:

> I mean, it was fun having, like, a goal. There was probably, like, a smarter way of getting to him, but it was fun having the goal to try and, you know, break this particular person of interest out of jail just to try and have them as a follower versus a lot of followers in the game, who just kind of turn up as you're going along. It was more of a targeted experience. That was kind of interesting.

Even though this participant failed in picking Inigo's cell lock, they appreciated working to get him because unmodded companions take very little work to recruit. Like these companions, Sofia did not take much effort to recruit because she was just suspiciously drunk and naked in the Whiterun Stables. For this participant, Inigo's buildup was strong and purposeful, unlike many companion NPCs in *Skyrim*. This participant appreciated that they had to work for him, which could mean Inigo provided a worthwhile challenge to the game since most of the vanilla companions usually join without much challenge.

Participant 27-M found both Sofia and Inigo as well as an accidental "Interesting NPC" named Among-The-Hiss. However, they were deliberately targeting as much modded content as possible to see what they could find during their hour:

> Let's get the mods and then go do something with that, so that was kind of, like, maybe the biggest difference between the way I was playing it this time. I don't know if that's a difference because if I was playing in the past with a mod on, that's probably the first thing I'm going to do is go—I think that's maybe a natural experience of modding a game. If you put a mod in, you're going to deliberately seek out that modded content because, like, otherwise why did you turn on the mod?

This interview seems to indicate that mods can enhance the narrative options of sandbox games like *Skyrim*. Although this participant's play style was deliberate (like others in this group), they

appreciated the dialogue options and backstory of each mod, and it is likely their involvement would have increased even more if they played the game for a longer period of time.

While these three participants appreciated the mods for offering more humor, challenges, and narratives, the remaining participants provided even more insight because they utilized the mods in a manner consistent with activities they already appreciated in the base game, enhancing their experience in the process. Participant 10-M enjoyed traveling with an ensemble cast of characters, and ultimately recruited both Sofia and Inigo. Not only did the mods change how the participant interacted with the world, but, from an emergent gameplay perspective outlined in Chapter Two that posits some styles of gameplay are not designed by the developers, also satirized the game world:

> I will say they changed the experience quite a bit, at least for me. Both characters, I think one intentionally and one unintentionally, were invoking some elements of satire, poking fun at the game world as a whole, and it turned the whole thing into a big joke for me, which not to say that's a bad thing. It was funny, but it definitely changed the gameplay and the way I was sort of interacting with the world and going about things. After I encountered the first character, it was pretty much let's just do what I think is going to provoke the most fun.

Mods can satirize the game world intentionally or unintentionally, but that is not to say that one is better than the other. However, as this participant indicated, mods are audience-specific since they do not have to be vetted by other individuals. This participant also took both mods (and Lydia) into battle for their own amusement. For a game in which technically one follower can join the Dragonborn, watching three characters fight on their behalf is quite amusing to see. This was not lost on the current participant who provided occasional meta-commentary on their

modded game experience in a high fantasy game like *Skyrim*. For example, after venturing out into the world following the dragon fight in Whiterun, the participant humorously chirped, "Come, my companions. I'm a man with an ensemble cast." They then proceeded to get into skirmishes in the world, laughing when Sofia, Inigo, and Lydia would dispatch an enemy before they could even attack. After watching one such battle in which Sofia obliterated an enemy, the participant sardonically quipped, "This is why I keep you around, Sofia," even though they recognized her fanservice qualities.

The experienced Participant 12-M stated that their primary purpose in sandbox games like *Skyrim* is to become immersed in the lore and the world around them. They also reported that they enjoy games that have complex characters and relationships. This participant was so impressed by the Inigo mod that it impacted their sense of immersion:

> My first mission was to go get the companion I wanted. You don't have to—they aren't necessary—but they become necessary because you want to get to know them. Well, personally for me, I wanted to know them as a person; how does this character operate? What sort of personality do they have? What's their history? So, I really thought, like, basic blank NPC characters are not going to talk that much. They won't have that much backstory with you, but, like, he was, like, telling me this about how he knew me, and it sucked me more into the game.

This participant expressed that they were drawn to narratives and relationships in games. As a result, this participant loved Inigo. Compared to blank NPCs in *Skyrim* that are usually one-dimensional, repetitive, and similar, Inigo added a completely new character dynamic that they had never seen before. The addition of the Inigo mod made the playthrough much more enjoyable and meaningful as a result.

Participant 22-M also loved the Inigo mod, but they appeared more impressed by his responses to the gameplay mechanisms than his exposition:

> Inigo, the companion that I was using over the course of that playthrough, he did things that improved on a lot of the mistakes that I think they made when they were designing the companion system. But that's kind of what modding is, right? It's a way to address something in the system where you're saying, "I like the framework that you created here, but here's something that I think adds some cool stuff to this thing."

From the start, this participant was interested in how mods manipulate rules or systems present in a base game. They viewed the Inigo mod as a positive form of manipulation that fixed what the participant perceived to be design flaws (or at the very least annoyances) persistent in companions that were coded into the game by Bethesda. This degree of sophisticated manipulation offered by the mod in this playthrough seemed to enhance their perceptions of control and enjoyment. Ultimately, this participant was interested in testing the Inigo mod in a dungeon and praised multiple characteristics. For example, Inigo can whisper when sneaking compared to other companions in *Skyrim*. Further, Inigo enhanced their experience of a task/side quest in the game that the participant expressed that they already enjoyed doing, which was exploring the subterranean dwellings of the falmer race, an evolved sub-species of elves who have been rendered blind. While this participant was bored with the game's main antagonists, dragons, they enjoyed these monsters because they are not as obvious in high fantasy entertainment. The participant took Inigo with them on a falmer quest and expressed that it was even more entertaining with such a great companion mod.

Finally, Participant 26-M was impressed by the way that the Inigo mod exploited *Skyrim*'s code and narrative in a way that they would never have discovered in the vanilla version:

> Especially when Lydia started speaking to Inigo and having whole new dialogue options that gave me immediate insight as to who Lydia was beforehand, that she liked to cook, which is something that I didn't know about her character, which could be made up by the modder, but that's something that brings more life to her character that I wouldn't have had before. I said in there, I was like, "Whoa," and I stopped, and I turned around just to listen to the conversation that was happening because that was very cool to me. That's stuff that I like. Those small stories are very appreciated by me.

It is interesting to note that perceptions of control and enjoyment outlined in Chapter Two are on full display in this response since Inigo's interactions with the existing companion Lydia combine embedded and emergent gameplay elements. Ultimately, the interaction was unintentional and a complete surprise. This participant appreciated Inigo because the subtle changes (i.e. Inigo's interactions with Lydia) enhanced both characters. However, part of modder Smartbluecat's success is that they gave Inigo many lines of dialogue when he approaches certain existing NPCs in *Skyrim*. While Participant 26-M was impressed with this moment, Smartbluecat did not actually give Lydia any new dialogue, but rather swiped dialogue from other NPCs (voice actors in *Skyrim* take on many roles) and coded it to her character to make it sound like she was engaging with Inigo. The participant also expressed that if a game provides them with an opportunity to explore a remote location before a closer mandatory quest, they will usually opt for the former. The Inigo mod offered them this opportunity. Since Inigo was in Riften (which is in the southeastern corner of the world map), finding Inigo was consistent with

this gamer's playing style since they expressed they enjoyed traveling away from than the main quest (Whiterun in this case). This participant was also interesting because they were intrigued by the quality of mods (both those chosen for the study and others). After interpreting this interview, it appears mods can make a significant impact on user experience if they are so well done that they could have been developed for the base game. In this regard, it could be that this participant believes good mods preserve immersion if they are consistent with the styles or themes of the base game.

Mods as Protein Powder: Negligible Impact, Supplements, and Needs

The play study produced a second finding, which was that mastery of the game and/or prior experience determined how participants would discuss their playthroughs or modding experience. While control is a feeling of influence, mastery is a sense of control for specific purposes that is usually related to specific tasks to denote proficiency. The closest psychological term for this phenomenon is self-efficacy (Bandura 191). In *Skyrim*, this might translate to participants having experience with the game and demonstrating significant skill. Mastery can be learned and, as the study showed, the more experienced gamers (masters) seemed to have a clear idea on how they wanted to play for their hour.

Mastery of the game was crucial to perceptions of control, both with and without mods. Patterns emerged in the modded and unmodded versions that can be illuminated using fitness and dietary supplements as a parallel. The Internet is littered with fitness articles on dietary supplements. Although brick and mortar and web stores try to promote supplements for better health or fitness, they are generally unnecessary if an individual has a healthy diet (they are

sometimes even dangerous in large doses). Like video games, fitness is most effective when it requires an objective. Fitness goals are certainly nuanced, and all training goals are different. Supplements are not generally required if an individual has a healthy diet conducive to their goals. If a game is designed so that it meets the needs of its gamers, it generally will not need mods as discussed in Chapter Three. Ultimately, a need motivates a certain outcome. Like protein powder, mods might be thought of as supplements that are unnecessary if the game delivers a certain promise to the gamers.

This study revealed that mods do not make a difference for participants who had not played the game before or generally do not play sandbox games. However, for those who played *Skyrim* in the past, the mods supplemented the experience in a manner further consistent with perceptions in bodybuilding. Two key fitness objectives are "bulking up" and "cutting down." If one wishes to put on more mass, they will need to consume more calories and protein. If one wishes to reduce mass, they will need to consume fewer calories. These two principles have been manipulated by dietary corporations for decades. By its definition, a supplement, once added, could enhance something else, which is a term known as "stacking" in bodybuilding. "Stacking" can also be used to describe how some mods can become essential to gameplay. "Cutting down" in a gaming context might mean returning to an unmodded state, and more experienced participants in the study expressed that they could no longer play unmodded *Skyrim* after discovering mods. For gamers that demonstrated mastery of *Skyrim* (i.e. they completed several playthroughs of *Skyrim*), interviews indicated that mods do not just supplement the experience, but fulfill needs that they believed the game failed to address.

Thirteen participants (seven unmodded and six modded) had no previous or minimal experience with *Skyrim*. These participants provided a baseline for how much control gamers

perceive to have in sandbox games as they were impressed by the size of the world and in-game choices available to them. Some of these participants even recognized that such choices are relevant to the sandbox genre. These participants typically spent their hour playing game features that the code already allowed, including talking to existing characters, exploring the countryside, getting into trouble, killing small animals, fighting guards and citizens, lockpicking, stealing, and collecting items (and becoming encumbered in the process). Some followed the main quest closely and seven participants even triggered the first dragon battle. Dragons are the primary antagonists in *Skyrim*, and this event seemed to gauge that these gamers were slowly adapting to the game. On the other hand, a few participants got lost and stayed near the town of Riverwood (which was where they started) for much of their playthrough.

The thirteen inexperienced *Skyrim* participants used words like "fun" to describe their playthroughs. Participant 11-U, who had no previous experience with *Skyrim*, fell in love with the world and thought it was immersive:

> I guess this isn't really related to the narrative, but the game is super pretty, and, like, I've seen screenshots and gifs and stuff like that. But I was impressed, and it made it more immersive, because it actually felt like a world instead of being like very cartoony.

For some, including this participant who played the modded version, but did not locate any of the mods, there was a sense of awe at how large the game world was as well as the choices they could make as recalled by Participant 18-M:

> You know, the most I've ever played *Skyrim* has been, like, two or three hours because I used to have my own copy, but it was, like, a bad copy of it. So, I was never able to save, which was really, really weird. So, like, it was really cool to actually play and, like, keep going without, like, when you die, like, having to go back all the way to the beginning.

> So, it was really cool to, like, actually play that and see how much more there is in the game because, like, I had been to Whiterun before when I played, but I've never gone out, like, so far out into the game to, like, do other things like that.

The inexperienced participants who played both the modded and unmodded versions genuinely seemed to appreciate how much there was to do in *Skyrim*, which seems to support degrees of control in sandbox games discussed earlier. Although Participant 20-M was inexperienced with the game, they found Inigo and stated the game's open world features would make them play the game in the future despite not enjoying fantasy games in the past:

> The game was really fun. I liked that it was open-ended. Like, you didn't tell me, "Okay, what you're going to be doing is you're going to try to do this mission." You know, you left it open-ended, so that was fun. Me personally, I've never been big into fantasy or, like, science fiction, like magic and warriors and stuff like that. But after playing that game, I think I will. Like, I might even try to get *Skyrim* because of the freedom.

This perception of freedom in a sandbox game like *Skyrim* was apparent to even the most inexperienced players. Except in the case of the above participant, who was the only inexperienced *Skyrim* gamer to claim that their playthrough was motivated by the mods, everyone discussed features in the game that the base game already allowed and supported. Some indicated that their interest was piqued enough to play *Skyrim* again. Others indicated that they did not care enough to pick up the game since they either do not play these types of games or did not think it could hold their interest for an extended period, such as the inexperienced Participant 16-M who noted that *Skyrim* "got boring at times, just having to sit there, but at the same time, you're immersed in the story." Even if this participant did not seem particularly invested in the game, they also acknowledged that the game was immersive. Therefore, the

thirteen novice participants support the notion that sandbox games are marketed and promoted by the perceptions of control afforded to the gamer since they generally provide choices, options, freedom, and world scope beyond what other genres provide.

Although these thirteen participants established a baseline that supports the idea that sandbox games are perceived to have more choices and control options than other genres, more experienced gamers were much less interested in the choices in the game and the size of the world because they played before and were more interested in discussing the mods. Participants 2-M, 8-M, and 27-M discussed earlier who expressed some familiarity with *Skyrim* stated that the mods they encountered supplemented their experience. Participant 2-M said that the mod supplemented the main narrative because their interactions with the Sofia mod made then more "interested in her as I kept playing along when I started some of the main stuff." Participant 8-M also stated that the chosen mods could potentially supplement their experience with the main narrative, which is interesting since they acknowledged that the main narrative never intrigued them. However, with these mods, the participant recognized that "the idea of going through it with a companion that might have interesting dialogue to go with that made it more desirable to bother to try it." Participant 8-M concluded their interview by stating "a follower that has more personality has made me want to consider trying it with more followers and stuff like to see how it goes, to see if it makes quests more lively." Participant 27-M expressed that the Sofia mod in particular supplemented the experience by providing a new layer of critical analysis. Was she supposed to provide ironic commentary on the trope of the attractive female in video games, or was this completely unintentional? This participant was very interested in her complex role in the game, but acknowledged that they would need to play the game for a longer period of time to produce a stronger answer.

The remaining participants had the most input on their relationships with mods; they had played the game for many hours or were at least more upfront with what they believed the vanilla game was no longer providing what they needed. Like fitness enthusiasts, these participants spoke about mods as if they were required for their performance rather than the supplements that they are perhaps intended to be. Even if the vanilla game was considered fun and classic, six participants from the unmodded group and four participants from the modded group used language to suggest that they viewed mods as essential components to their video game experience that either improved or fixed an issue. Participant 26-M went as far as to say that mods may be vital to user agency. They noted, "Now I think mods, like I was saying, there are some personal things you might want from the game, and that could be whatever. So, I think that the players bringing their own sort of agency towards that game when they mod it…" As control is an important component to human agency (whether in physical or digital worlds), this participant indicated that through mods, the gamer is allowed a heightened sense of control over the product. This participant chose to specifically conceptualize this argument using Bethesda's Creation Club to describe the relationship between modders and video game companies, but the fact that they used the word "agency" was particularly striking.

Participant 1-U was among the most experienced individuals in the study. After learning that they would play the unmodded version, they performed a speed run of the main narrative and made it the dungeon Ustengrav to obtain the Horn of Jurgen Windcaller, which was the furthest any participant progressed the story. However, during the interview, they reported that they transitioned to playing modded versions of sandbox games because they "kind of get hungry for a new taste of it, so if you've played it enough, there's always something to do, but you kind of get a little tired of doing the same thing over and over again. So, the mod, like small mods like

to change the textures and stuff like that, but then things like where it changes where you start the game just to put more like spice into it." For this participant, mods provide "spice" once the game becomes tedious. They are obviously still "hungry" to play sandbox games like *Skyrim*, but they require mods to make any future playthroughs more interesting. Participant 9-U reiterated this sentiment and openly discussed Arthmoor's "Alternate Start" mod discussed in Chapter One (Participants 1-U and 22-M also mentioned this mod). This mod provides the participant with a heightened sense of role-playing "by, like, making a personality or something dumb like that. And then hitting up that can send them into a world that makes more sense for the roleplay, I suppose." Since Arthmoor's mod bypasses a key moment in *Skyrim* that paints the Dragonborn as a felon headed towards their execution (the wagon ride to Helgen), the participant acknowledged that the mod gave their new character "rules that the character will live by." This additional element of creating an ethical code for the character to follow produces a "better experience in the game" that can no longer be achieved in the vanilla version.

These two participants indicate that the mods they use can offer them more, which was consistent with individuals who played the modded version. Such was the case for Participant 12-M who remarked that the variable game with the mods had fewer mods than they were accustomed to:

> I play *Skyrim* and it's cool. But it's, like, you want more. So, it's kind of like reading a short story with, like, 7 pages and it gets good and just stops. It's like, "What happened?" I want to know more, so, like, with the interactions, you get, like, two or three dialogues. It always repeats. Like, in the marriages, you get two or three dialogues, and it always repeats. So, I just wanted more from the story because I knew it could give me more. You guys, Bethesda can do better than this.

It is interesting that this participant asked for more story and not necessarily more mods that bring choices. However, the participant noted that they began to download mods to specifically address this concern to fix their specific gaming needs so that they could have more control over their experience. This participant openly acknowledged that they like the game, but made sure to call out Bethesda for not doing enough with their dialogue and narrative options. A sandbox game can be great yet still fail to deliver certain needs. The two concepts are not mutually exclusive. This was true for this participant who noted that they started to download mods in part to specifically make narratives in the world seem more dynamic since the game eventually failed to give them more story elements.

For Participant 10-M (who has experience creating mods), mods were necessary because they can restore immersion and illusory control addressed in Chapter Two if a problem or glitch that the company was not going to fix frustrated them. These annoyances were viewed as limitations that were detrimental to an otherwise enjoyable game: "You bump into the wall or something rudely jumps out at you, as is my case, where I was, 'I was enjoying myself, and I felt immersed, and now I don't, and now I am going to go mod that.' And I am going to restore the illusion so to speak." This participant's response also links immersion with perceived control because if an error within a sandbox game like *Skyrim* forces them to lose a sense of immersion, their perceptions of control within the game are also negatively impacted until they find a way to fix them. Participant 7-U did not specifically address a particular mod, but they expressed that it is difficult to become immersed in vanilla *Skyrim* after playing so many times, even though they believe it is a classic game. For them, the experience was a reminder that *Skyrim* can be repetitive, especially early on, because "when you've played it a few times and you're doing the same quests, it does get to kind of be like a more mechanical motion rather than you're actually

trying to get immersed into the game for the first time." Participant 7-U ended their interview by noting that more recent playthroughs included aesthetic and narrative mods to specifically expand on DLC like *Skyrim: Dawnguard*.

Participant 15-U also noted that their sense of immersion was impacted because the vanilla version did not have mods that they were used to, including, coincidentally, Inigo: "The one I miss the most probably was my companion follower Inigo since he feels more alive and more of a person than any of the followers in the base game. Like Lydia, I think she's boring. She just gets in the way whereas my mod follower. He does so much more." For these participants, mods preserved a sense of immersion that was no longer possible in the vanilla game due to their previous playthroughs. Participant 15-U even went as far as to state, "I felt like a part of the game was missing for me," reiterating that mods could no longer be viewed as simple supplements if their omission invited conscious reflection of a void that needed to be filled.

For some participants, there was evidence that mods could no longer be viewed as supplementary because the base game was simply too old to love, perhaps like a bodybuilder who modifies their diet or regimen once their progress begins to plateau. Participant 13-U commented that it is more enjoyable to play with mods because they fix the limitations and annoyances that plague the original *Skyrim*. They noted that "modding those away and just starting with an ideal *Skyrim* state is always better than the original, in my opinion." The concept of an ideal *Skyrim* state is intriguing, especially since these experienced participants seemed to agree that it was not possible without mods. This participant built up to this response as it was evident that they were bored with the unmodded version, using words like "tedious" and "going through the motions" to describe their playthrough. The unmodded version allowed them to

initiate the Thieves Guild quest in Riften, which was one of the few features of the base game that they still enjoyed.

Skyrim's age also produced feelings of exhaustion that could only be fixed using mods. This was the case for Participant 22-M who played the modded version and stated that the opening sequence is almost unplayable:

> Then there's "Alternate Start" mods, which I've played *Skyrim* enough to where I am absolutely sick of Helgen. I'm over Alduin showing up, knocking everybody over. I've got that entire sequence memorized. It's exhausting. So, the "Alternate Start" mod where you just wake up and you're like, "Oh, cool. Let's do this, guys," I'm down with that for economy's sake.

This participant was still interested in playing *Skyrim*, but they had played so much that events like those at the very beginning of the game and subsequent missions were no longer conducive to their playing style. While the inclusion of mods was not solely motivated by more choice options, mods do provide options that match their playing styles once they grow weary of certain aspects in the base game. As was the case with many other participants, this individual was no longer talking about mods as supplements, but rather needs that could make the tedium more bearable.

Conclusion

Sandbox mods might be supplements. However, in the case of several of these participants, the mods did not just enhance the experience, but were essential. It could be argued that mods improve a sandbox game once the experience is stale. Mods are treated as

supplements, but they fulfill needs linked to one of the most important components of game design: gamer perceptions of control. These perceptions impact important qualities like interest, enjoyment, immersion, playing style, and replayability. By interviewing the expert *Skyrim* participants, it seems that sandbox fatigue is recognized among certain gamers. When this happens, gamers become burnt out with what they perceive to be the same repetitive options that they perform ad nauseum even if the game promises many choices. The illusion of freedom and control becomes visible when this occurs, and the gamer will have to find other ways to restore qualities that made the base game worth playing. Mods break up this tedium or contribute to the sandbox game in manners that they need to keep playing.

It is plausible that mods enhance perceptions of control in part due to their immediacy. If gamers are unhappy or bored with their experience, they can get online whenever they wish and download mods since the process is often streamlined through mod managing systems. If gamers happen to be skilled at programming (or are seeking a challenge as was the alleged case for the developer of "Interesting NPCs"), they can create a mod themselves. In this regard, mods are different than official DLC in that the gamer will have to wait substantial lengths of time for the company to make the additions or improvements. Compared to most DLC, then, gamers are literally in control of what they wish to put into games that allow modding when the company is too slow or disinterested in accommodating their individual needs.

However, this study also reveals that perceptions of freedom in sandbox games, as well as mods, are commodities that preserve the relationship between the gamer and corporation as outlined in Chapter Three. There is reason to believe that the allure of agency in sandbox games makes it difficult for many gamers to outright end their relationship with these games, even when the experience stagnates. The interviews revealed that there is indeed love for sandbox games,

but it is a love that is often tested by frustration. As stated by Participant 10-M, “There can be some bugs or whatever, but people on the Internet will go fix it for free. I don’t like that business model, but I still love the games.” Additionally, Participant 17-U stated on mods that make the experience more convenient for them, “I like [those mods] because I’m like, ‘Why couldn’t you have done this before in the game? Why did you have to have someone else come do the game developer’s work for you?’” If this relationship will ever improve is up for debate, but the interviews with the expert gamers suggest that some in the gaming community are willing to maintain it and extend the game’s shelf life in the process despite knowing that it requires dire improvements. Participant 10-M concluded their interview with that thought and noted, “I like that this content is available and that people do it and it’s there, but I don’t like how the incentive structures are aligned, you know?” It appears as if sandbox games and their corresponding mods can manipulate gamer perceptions wherein the more they play the game, the more the mods become vital. It would be too harsh to say that gaming companies exploit mods for nefarious intent, but there is enough reason to conclude that if the onus of responsibility is on the gamer to improve their individual experience, mods are the savior to lazy or stale game design first put forward by the developer.

CHAPTER FIVE: SECOND PLAY STUDY RESULTS: GAMER PERCEPTIONS OF FREEDOM OF VIDEO GAME GENRES

"That's something that I apply to my everyday life. You know, I played video games since I was very little, and I played a lot of RPGs like this one where you have to make choices. And, um, you decide whether you want to get into trouble or not—if you want to play by the rules that they have in the world set for you or not. That's how I look at a lot of things in life. Like, you decide what you choose. You know, what you do, if you want to get into trouble, if you want to set a goal, then accomplish it. You know, basically in the game, you do everything that you can to accomplish that goal. So, I try to apply those rules to my life. It's not exactly the same, but it definitely helps, especially with the commitment and the patience that you have to have sometimes. So that's definitely—I think video games gave me the most patience in life. Honestly." – Play Study Participant 3-U

Findings on mods probably fall under rational thinking rather than intuition. Recall that the difference between both levels of thought is that while intuition may be instinctual, immediate, or require no previous evidence, rational analysis generally involves more assessment, specificity, and implementation via conscious reasoning. Experimental philosophy is primarily concerned with probing the intuitions of ordinary folk, but a push for qualitative research would invite rational analysis. For example, Andow writes, "Suppose that our intuitive, quick, unconsidered response to a case is P, but upon a moment's reflection, every ordinary person would immediately think that P is incorrect. Would or should philosophers only be interested in the immediate reaction? The answer is clearly no" (1136). Although there were no wrong answers in the play study, I believe the playthroughs and interviews invited rational conceptualization on mods because the participants had one hour to play the game, which

allowed for in-game reflection as evidenced by certain observational notes. They had considerable time to ponder what impact, if any, mods or a lack of mods had on their experience as they knew which version they would play prior to picking up the controller. Responses were certainly varied, but there was support that perceptions of control, mastery, and mods go together.

While these findings were largely rational, the study also presents evidence that gamers were thinking intuitively about perceptions of control in physical and digital worlds, or at the very least terminology consistent with this concept. Philosophical intuitions of ordinary individuals have been closely-observed in experimental philosophy. Even as the field gained traction, questions in experimental philosophy usually concerned "whether intuition can be understood clearly and defended adequately as a source of foundational a priori justification" (Sosa 106). Recent scholarship also questions if intuition can be considered solid evidence due to issues concerning insufficiency, applicability, and inadmissibility (Molyneux 446). Certain previous studies cited in the first chapter seemingly relied on intuition, and the results were usually inconclusive. The debate over how important intuitions currently are to the field was even addressed by one of its pioneers, Joshua Knobe, in the 2017 *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on "Experimental Philosophy." However, while the conscious responses from participants on their playthroughs were unique and described what impact mods have on perceptions of control, the play study was also able to produce data on the intuitions of the gamers selected for the study. Two trends emerged among the participants (both modded and unmodded) that describe phenomena discussed in the previous chapters. First, participants discussed perceptions of control in reality and video games using terminology consistent with

negative and positive models of freedom. Second, participants used established genre conventions to analyze and compare control and choices in games.

Twenty Participants Analyzed Perceptions of Control Using Negative Freedom

As addressed earlier, negative freedom is freedom from something while positive freedom is the capacity to do something. Philosopher Charles Taylor also identified negative freedom as an opportunity concept and positive freedom as an exercise concept. All 27 participants recognized that no game can produce a radical sense of free will because each experience is determined at the level of the architecture within the code. Participants felt like they could do some things in the game (modded and unmodded), but there are some things they could not. However, there is some control gamers can monkey wrench, which seemed to be more apparent in the modded playthroughs. The first four primary questions in each interview were specifically about video games or *Skyrim* playthroughs. However, Question Five was the most philosophical as it asked gamers how they view control in reality and video games: "How would you say games compare to everyday life in terms of having control over situations or outcomes?" All responses were varied as each participant discussed such abstract concepts as agency, simulation, control, and other phenomena. Despite this variety, participants perhaps did not know (barring previous enrollment in philosophy or ethics courses) that they were using terminology and expressions consistent with negative and positive freedom.

Twenty participants (eight unmodded and twelve modded) described their perceptions of control in reality and video games using concepts that could be linked with negative freedom. These participants were describing their perceptions of control predominately through opportunities and restraints in both digital and physical environments. These twenty participants

interpreted opportunities and restrictions in three distinct ways: interactions with people, opportunities to retry in video games, and external forces that inhibit opportunities.

Five of these participants (1-U, 2-M, 6-M, 12-M, and 23-U) specifically described opportunities and restraints using interactions with other people to frame their responses. Participant 1-U stated, "So in real life, you can't do whatever you want, but you can choose how you say things to certain people, and so in the game like that, you do get different options to say things." Participant 6-M also commented that "you're also constrained in the fact that when you do talk to a character and you have four choices. Well, you have five. You can either say or do one of those four choices or the fifth choice is back away and go somewhere else." Both participants indicated that even though a game like *Skyrim* mimics real life interactions, dialogue options in the real world are always going to be more numerous. Three participants elaborated on this point by noting that game dialogue options will always lead to the same outcomes. Participant 2-M used the *Persona* series to articulate that "even in a game as relationship-specific as that, where you can mess up a relationship with someone by saying, like, the wrong thing, as long as you go spend more time with them, eventually they are going to like you again." Social links grow over the course of *Persona*, and these events will lead to a strong bond between the protagonists and his confidantes. However, Participant 2-M noted that these gameplay mechanisms usually do not work in reality. In addition to more numerous dialogue options in everyday situations, this participant expressed that we have very little control over others in everyday interactions. Whereas we can rely on NPCs to like us in a game like *Persona* (or even *Skyrim*) if certain steps are taken, some people in the real world "might just not like you and they are never going to like you." Participant 12-M reiterated this sentiment by using the Inigo mod as evidence since they were disappointed that there was no dialogue option that allows the

protagonist to forgive Inigo for apparently trying to murder them in the past. They agreed with Participant 2-M by stating, “I feel like you definitely have less control over choices in real life because people aren’t programmed. It’s just people, but the NPCs are programmed to only have certain responses.”

Finally, Participant 23-U noted that there is very little nuance available in video game dialogue. The participant described a popular dichotomy in games as “. . .do you want to tell the truth or lie? And then it’s, like, well, maybe you can exaggerate or fudge the number, not straight up tell a complete fib.” Everyday interactions allow responses that will change depending on how much information the agent wishes to divulge, or how they view their relationship with the individuals with whom they are communicating. However, most games are coded in a way that currently renders this impossible, which prevents dialogue options that would seem more appropriate depending on the circumstances.

Importantly, coercion over others is precisely what many proponents of negative freedom (including Berlin) fear about positive freedom. However, I believe these participants were not describing interactions maliciously. Further, the responses were not articulated in a manner to suggest they would purposely manipulate another person. Participants were merely reporting that when comparing interactions in real and digital environments, opportunities and restrictions are much more structured in the latter because they are part of a video game’s underlying code. Communication and interactions in video games are limited by strict dialogue options that offer much less nuance than options in a typical everyday conversation. Yet while there are certainly more options in real life when it comes to communicating with others, these participants recognized that gamers have more control over the progression of dialogue in game worlds.

Eight participants (1-U, 8-M, 15-U, 19-U, 20-M, 23-U, 25-U, and 27-M) described that a fundamental difference between opportunities in games and the real world is the ability to retry in a game. This was evidenced by the use of terms such as "restart button," "abusing saves," "retry," "load your last save point," and "unlimited lives." For these participants, if an opportunity was not achieved in a video game, they can simply start over until they get the desired outcome. They have control over this experience, even if all video games do have constraints. Ultimately, while there are more opportunities in reality, there are finite chances (just one in many cases), which was aptly described by one of Participant 23-U's response involving a hypothetical choice situation: "'Hey, that's not so good,' and you're stuck with that." This point was articulated in more detail by Participant 27-M who noted that failure and consequences when seeking opportunities are much less significant in video games because they allow gamers to save and restart. This participant cited their playthrough as an example because they ended their session by jumping to their death off a cliff. While amusing in a game like *Skyrim*, the consequences of such a choice in reality are much more severe. Jumping off a mountain is technically an opportunity, but "you'll have an experience for like two seconds, and then you'll hit the ground and die."

Participant 27-M's explanation of consequences (this was also discussed by Participants 15-U and 20-M) segues into the third noticeable negative freedom trend in the study, which was the discussion that external forces perhaps inhibit opportunities in everyday life or video games. Thirteen participants (4-M, 7-U, 9-U, 10-M, 13-U, 14-M, 15-U, 16-M, 20-M, 22-M, 23-U, 24-M, and 27-M) reported this phenomenon. Three participants (13-U, 16-M, and 23-U) responded in manners that suggest more opportunities are available in reality than video games as Participant 13-U even declared "in real life you have unlimited options, and there's, you know, not really

anything you can't do." Participant 16-M also noted that game worlds developed by video game designers are "more streamlined, more structured," which produces "more expected behavior." Further, it was already noted that three participants (15-U, 20-M, and 27-M) believed opportunities were greater in reality, but so are the consequences. This could be related to the concept of restarting a save file.

Six participants (4-M, 7-U, 9-U, 10-M, 14-M, and 22-M) responded to the fifth question by describing that even though choices in video games are constrained, so are choices in reality. Participant 4-M noted that the same limitations do not exist in reality, but also believed "real life does have those things that you don't have under your control. And the people kind of think those, like, uncontrollable factors like their work or their other sorts of things to be sort of limiting factors." Participant 7-U stated that they have more control in games and agreed that everyday life is regimented because "you have things that you have to do. You have to go to work. You have to eat. You have to go to school, if you're in school. Like, there are specific things that you do have to do." Participant 9-U also believed that they have more control in games, justifying this claim using a personal story that their credit card was once stolen: "So, that's not something I planned to happen, but it was out of nowhere. That's just life, you know. Video games are random and different, but they're never like that; just sideways." For these two participants, the opportunities found in video games were reliable and much more enjoyable than the mundane limitations or frustrations in the real world. Reliability was also important for Participant 22-M, who noted that the rewards for completing a video game quest will not always translate in the real world since they are not computer programs: "You can reasonably expect a thing to happen, and that's not to say they can't surprise you, because of course they can. But the surprises are usually a good thing." For this participant, a surprise or limitation like suddenly

getting attacked by a boss is much more fulfilling than, for example, a sudden lease increase on one's apartment. Participant 10-M (mentioned in Chapter Two) explained these limitations in real life through neurobiology. Although they did not support the notion wholesale, they admitted that they partially believe "our brains are just collections of chemicals and various balances of chi. When a certain chemical, you know, goes up, certain values go to high, neurons are triggered." The participant admitted that this was not a very good personal philosophy (especially in terms of control), and they prefer to think that they do have control of their lives and video game playthroughs. Finally, Participant 14-M expressed that restraints in physical and digital worlds were similar. This participant was poignant in their response as they noted that "it's not really as free as you would think it would be, because there are things like laws, and expected behaviors, and, like, codes of professionalism," highlighting the debate about opportunities and restraints associated with negative freedom in all sorts of environments.

Seven Participants Analyzed Perceptions of Control Using Positive Freedom

Although responses were varied, it was easy to see trends in how participants viewed opportunities and restraints, which were coded as negative freedom perceptions of control. The remaining seven participants (five unmodded and two modded) used language that seemed to support positive freedom. However, these codes were different than those found in negative freedom responses, and thus required more interpretation. The consistent trend was that none of these participants seemed to perceive control using external opportunities or limitations. While the previous participants were more likely to discuss external obstacles, these seven participants shared internal factors. Participant 3-U disclosed that video games taught them to be a patient

person. They likened the experience to accomplishing a personal goal and reported, “I try to apply those rules to my life. It’s not exactly the same, but it definitely helps, especially with the commitment and the patience that you have to have sometimes. So that’s definitely—I think video games gave me the most patience in life.” By playing games that forced them to practice patience (their example was the difficult PS4 game *Bloodborne*), the participant stated that games assisted them in assessing what is even worth getting upset over. Positive freedom here might be defined as a capacity to demonstrate patience when confronted with adversity, which shaped their life outlook, and patience was a real-life skill they learned while playing difficult video games.

Goal-setting was also expressed by Participant 5-U, who suggested that games can assist in paying attention to details. They noted that “you need to pay attention to things” in games because problems could develop that will inhibit future progress, which could be an allegory for life. That was the full extent of the response, but Participant 17-U reported that they liked to model life goals like quests in video games. For example, “like coming to work is kind of like setting a quest, like, I’ll have stuff I’m going to have to do. I need to move some boxes. So, it’s kind of setting myself up for I’m going to do this task, see it through, and then I’ll get rewarded by getting paid.” In this respect, video games allow the participant to role-play in life to achieve tangible outcomes that will benefit them.

If Participant 17-U described role-playing as an extension of their life outside the game, Participant 26-M viewed their life as an extension within the game itself: “More as my life goes on and I become like an adult, I definitely feel like you play games as an extension of your own life in some way, and you do want control over those certain things.” This participant explained that before they were a college-aged student, completing a quest in *Skyrim* like becoming a mage

at the College of Winterhold would not have much of an impact on their life. However, as a current college student, it made more sense to grant that option to their avatar "because that's where I'm at in life right now." Based on this response, reflective experiences teach the participant about how they currently view their sense of control or even position in the real world.

Another component of positive freedom is self-mastery, or becoming one's own master. Participant 11-U suggested this principle in video games like *Skyrim*. They responded, "Everyone's kind of like, I mean, cliché, but a hero of their own story. But in the game, like, you're the most important person, so you get to kind of ultimately decide, especially in this kind of game where you affect the narrative so much." In real life, most individuals think of agency in these terms since most people are "heroes of their own story." In video games (especially sandbox games), this point is demonstrated because gamers are asked to play to "get the world to go the way you want." Ultimately, if self-mastery is a goal for proponents of positive freedom, this participant discussed the notion by presenting games as simulations that could reach this ideal.

Of these seven responses, Participants 18-M and 21-U had responses that were difficult to interpret. Participant 18-M described some choices in *Skyrim* as part of a "rudimentary karma system where if you do bad actions, bad things will happen." An agent usually does not have freedom from consequences, so the participant seems to have described positive freedom in this context. Positive freedom can be applied to moral or ethical studies because the "core of positive freedom as well as that of 'true' freedom is to be a moral agent" (Dimova-Cookson 528). This participant seems to have accidentally linked their "rudimentary karma system" in video games to positive moral freedom in reality because they elaborated that an agent could "do something

really, really bad, but then, like, throw the karma cycle out the window and just, like, do something really good." Although tenuous, the response at the very least points to how some gamers may perceive ethics in games. On the other hand, Participant 21-U had a much more existential response to perceptions of control. They described a fear of making choices in life because "life doesn't have clear-cut choices, and it can be kind of scary, which is why sometimes it's fun to think of life as a video game because you feel like you have more control than you really do." This participant could be describing obstacles associated with negative freedom, but they did not explicitly mention what these might be. Instead, this participant was the only one to state that making decisions can be scary and their response seems to indicate an internal dilemma. This was the youngest participant in the play study, so it is possible that they were just beginning to recognize what it means to have or assess agency in different environments.

Ultimately, all 27 participants had interesting responses to perceptions of control in physical and digital environments. They were interesting in part because it is doubtful many of the participants knew anything about negative and positive freedom and neither were explicitly mentioned in the interview questions. Yet they did explain certain principles without prompting. The reason so many participants discussed negative freedom is probably because they recognized that all video games have limitations and external restrictions that prevent any of us from doing whatever we want. However, they applied this knowledge to explain why and how this relates to real life using specific examples as evidence (whether similarly or differently). Future research on people like the seven participants who addressed positive freedom may be instrumental in studies on what video games can teach us about self-actualization, internal struggles, goal-setting, willpower, and developing a purpose in life. While such research is outside the scope of this dissertation, by trusting participants who would be defined in experimental philosophy as

"the folk," this study shows that participants will not shy away from answering challenging questions in qualitative interviews. Or at the very least, they can describe phenomena using their past experiences or own interpretations about the world.

Gamers Use Established Genre Conventions to Analyze and Compare Control and Choices in Games

The second implicitly intuitive finding in the play study was that many participants discussed control using genre or generic conventions without prompting (no question explicitly mentioned the word "genre," but some follow-up questions called for certain participants to elaborate on the term if they used it). The most obvious trend was that 20 out of the 27 participants (eleven unmodded and nine modded) explicitly or implicitly stated that their perceptions of control are higher in sandbox video games like *Skyrim*. It was common for participants to describe their feelings of control in sandbox games using words like "freedom," greater "exploration," many "quests," "side quests," "choices," "free enough of rules," and "doing what you want." Participant 4-M was one of the first participants to make the connection because they stated that *Skyrim* "gives you just this playground to do many different things in where you can play in many different ways. It still has those limitations; you're not entirely in control. . .but this way you have a lot of freedom to do things and bend the game's rules in a lot of different ways." Participant 7-U also noted, "I feel like it depends on the kind of video game that you choose because a lot of them are more linear. But with *Skyrim* and other open world games, you really get to modify the character to what you want, and you can have complete control over the environment, your character, and the narrative." The sentiments resonated with both experienced and inexperienced *Skyrim* players, even if they described the phenomenon in

varying degrees of familiarity. Experienced players like Participant 10-M described generic conventions by alluding to boundaries in various video games:

> That's sort of the nature of the medium, kind of like we understand when we watch a movie, we can't really change what's going on to a certain degree. The difference with video games is sort of within the bound that's kind of established, and there's usually some genre conventions on exactly where those boundaries are for any type of game. Generally speaking, I know what my options are likely to be, what I can do, how I can do it, and so, yeah, there's a degree of control.

Participant 10-M would be considered an expert with other games and genres, so they were likely drawing from a large knowledge base of games to compare with open world games like *Skyrim* (as a comparison, they also discussed narrative choices in the walking simulator *What Remains of Edith Finch*). Conversely, Participant 6-M did not have any experience with *Skyrim* and preferred 2-D platformers like Moon Studios' *Ori and the Blind Forest*. This did not prevent them for recognizing the perceptions of generic conventions in sandbox games like *Skyrim*:

> From what I see from this and talking to other people that play these types of games, your quests, there's such a more great *[sic]* variety of them that you can choose between them. You can play all of them if you felt like it. You can play one of them. You don't even need to really do a quest per se. You can just wander around and kill chickens and punch yaks.

The baseline participants who had no previous experience with *Skyrim* were nevertheless quite comfortable explaining perceptions of control using generic conventions. The play study also was not an endorsement for these types of games as some participants indicated that they had no

desire to play *Skyrim* in the future. In other words, acknowledgement of perceptions of control in sandbox games did not guarantee enjoyment.

It was also common for participants to describe agency in *Skyrim* using games or genres with which they were familiar. Participant 21-U compared control in *Skyrim* to control in turn-based role-playing games like *Pokémon*. Participant 26-M compared *Skyrim* to the action-adventure series *God of War* and noted that "you could, in theory, role-play as Kratos in your head, but you're not in control of that storyline. The storyline is what they give you." Participant 11-U also dove into a deeper genre analysis and compared *Skyrim* to Square-Enix's *Kingdom Hearts*:

> So, like, in *Kingdom Hearts*, which is a game I've been playing a lot, you just make decisions so that you can trigger the next cutscene essentially, so you go to the next area, you defeat the Heartless, then you get the next storyline cutscene and they tell you where else you're supposed to go. But for *Skyrim*, I just wandered around for like the first twenty minutes. So, you can kind of do whatever you want.

Comparatively speaking, both *Skyrim* and *Kingdom Hearts* are role-playing games, the latter of which is Japanese. As noted in the first chapter, however, Japanese RPGs tend to have tighter narratives that prod the gamer towards certain objectives. Participant 11-U recognized the differences between these two games and used these differences to describe the perceptions of control in a vast genre. Conversely, Participant 13-U described the walking simulator genre during their interview. They specifically mentioned *The Stanley Parable* detailed in Chapter Three:

> The whole game is based on walking and what choices you make and what paths you decide to walk down. Whether you go through a door or hesitate. Whether you want to sit

> in a broom closet for fifteen minutes. The best ending. But there's all sorts of different choices, and the whole game revolves around sometimes just following, listening to the narrator, listening to a story. It's almost like an interactive story.

Participant 13-U's glowing endorsement of the choices in *The Stanley Parable* reinforce the notion that all even the most restrictive games contain some semblance of freedom, and some choices in games may in fact be more meaningful than in others. However, during the third direct question in the interview, this experienced *Skyrim* player described their playthrough as "very repetitive. I have played *Skyrim* a lot in the past, and so what I did was more of a going through the motions." Despite greater perceptions of control in sandbox games, the allure of the genre can seem disinteresting if other genres like walking simulators are more capable of holding the gamer's interest after several playthroughs.

Although perceptions of control in sandbox games were interpreted as greater among these participants, some described genre using pre-established conventions. One such example is that eight participants described narrative trees as an impactful genre convention for storytelling in mostly role-playing games (Participants 2-M, 18-M, and 22-M were in this group, but were not among those who suggested that perceptions of control are greater in sandbox games). The branching narrative is popular in many major video games because it provides the gamer with the sensation that they are crafting their own video game experience. In addition to *Skyrim* (and other open world games like Bethesda's other RPG *Fallout*), the most common game mentioned was BioWare's RPG *Mass Effect*. Eight participants discussed that branching narratives were indicators of perceived control, and six of these explicitly discussed *Mass Effect*. The assumption is that certain outcomes will unfold in games that are based on previous choices made by the player or, as explained by Participant 18-M, "the story is always going to go from A to B to C,

all the way to Z, but it might just be that depending on how you play, it could be A to G to C to L to W back to C." Branching narratives promote the illusion that player "choices" impact the narrative. Some participants, like Participant 2-M, wholly endorse branching storylines in games like *Mass Effect*:

> All the ways you can communicate with different players and how that doesn't just impact how the other characters see your character interacting with them as Commander Shepard, but also just the result of those, based on what you say, that can be the difference between if a character lives or dies. Or, and not just the game you are playing, but in later games, two games down the line, which that kind of control and that kind of narrative really leaves on impact on you when you play for the first time.

Participant 12-M went beyond Participant 2-M's summation by providing a specific example of a well-placed narrative tree that impacted their experience in *Mass Effect 3*:

> So one of my hardest decisions that I had to make in a video game was in *Mass Effect 3* when I had to choose whether to save Tali or Legion, because I am more of a, like, equal opportunities—like, everyone deserves a chance, and, like, the Geth, like, I didn't want to kill them, but also I knew Tali since game one, so I was, like, "Ugh!" So, I actually hadn't saved for, like, 3 hours and I actually went back and played because I figured out how to save both of them, because at first when I made the decision not to kill the Geth, I ended up killing Tali because I didn't know it was going to happen. So, I went back and changed it, so I made sure to save both people. So, I just feel, like, I feel like decision-making is really important, especially if you get the player to connect with the characters.

While these two quotes demonstrate that branching narratives impact some users in intriguing ways (death is one such mechanism), some believe that narrative trees are a gimmick since they

might not actually change much in the game. A dialogue tree often lures the gamer into believing that their decisions will impact some portion of the story or gameplay. Occasionally, this is true, but the game will ultimately have to converge back into something that looks familiar no matter what prior action was taken. This sentiment was echoed by Participant 4-M who noted that choice in *Mass Effect* "builds up the narrative and changes in different ways, though it doesn't matter in the end." Chapter Three presented some examples of this happening in games like *Mass Effect 3* and *Life Is Strange*, the latter of which crescendos to a binary choice that essentially disregards every other choice made in the game so that Max chooses to save Chloe or the entire town from certain oblivion. Video games can be comforting, entertaining, and satisfying when some semblance of a narratological plot structure is maintained. However, gamers also can express disappointment when a feature like branching narratives exposes that none of their choices mattered.

Although individuals, especially gamers, appreciate some opportunities to play within the plot structure, closure is important. Without determinism as a guiding philosophy, closure would be hard, if not impossible, to achieve. As a result, gimmicks like branching narratives are considered safe within the industry:

> They tend to build the narrative around these "proven" mechanics, using other narrative devices, like environmental storytelling, cutscenes or dialogues for their storytelling. By choosing these familiar mechanics at the start of a project, designers deprive themselves of fully exploring what kind of narratives experiences they can create with games, simply because these existing mechanics only allow for particular kind of story events to unfold. (Dubbelman 39)

In the interest of interactivity, some gamers prefer branching narratives while others prefer scripted events. In the genres that use them, however, narrative trees will not disappear any time soon as there does not seem to be a feature that can currently replace them.

Some participants even cited games beyond open world titles like *Skyrim/Fallout* or less open world games like *Mass Effect* for comparison. These games were predominately one-offs, buy they helped frame the larger conversation of video game genres to show examples that they were using to describe perceptions of control. Games mentioned during interviews included the interactive dramas *Heavy Rain* and *Beyond Two Souls* by David Cage; the venerable tabletop game *Dungeons and Dragons*; Moon Studios' beautiful platformer *Ori and the Blind Forest*; *Castlevania*, which has oscillated between 2-D platformer and 3-D action-adventure with RPG elements; Toby Fox's independent RPG *Undertale* that allows gamers to spare enemies, thereby changing its ending; and even 2K's *FIFA 17* for its RPG elements. While such games conceptualized individual gaming experiences and schema as well as predilections, they also support how gamers approach a topic like genre analysis. Even if gamers did not play sandbox games or, for example, role-playing games, they recognized characteristics across multiple genres.

CHAPTER 6: GAME DESIGN AND MODIFICATIONS: CHALLENGES AND SUGGESTIONS

"Other than Inigo, I don't know if I saw any other mods in the game while I was playing. Well, Inigo, that was really cool too, because it didn't feel too cliché as far as storyline stuff. Like, a character that just has a hard-set script or a hard-set program interaction with me as the gamer, so I thought that was really cool. I do think that if there was Inigo, Sofia, and more mods, I think I would definitely be interested in it, because, like, Grand Theft Auto, people mod that crazy, and I find that stuff really interesting. I actually bought Grand Theft Auto because when I saw the mods and stuff, I thought that came in-game. I didn't really understand the concept of mods. Then I was like, 'I probably won't be able to create mods.' I'm not that level or anything. But, yeah. If Skyrim had, like, more stuff like Inigo, I would really like it. And that's coming from someone who's not even crazy about role-playing games and stuff. But I would get into it." – Play Study Participant 20-M

In this dissertation, I conducted a qualitative play study that showed video game modifications enhance perceptions of control and engagement in sandbox video games like *Skyrim*. Further, gamers are cognizant of perceptions of freedom and genre expectations, which influence their views on game design. Based on the content of the first five chapters, I have isolated four challenges that gamers, designers, and scholars should consider when addressing the future of mods, game design, and even agency in digital environments:

- Mods can make a positive impact on user experience in sandbox video games, but they still favor corporations and their future is nebulous.
- Despite the importance of mods, designers should be cautious of sandbox fatigue.

- Designers should consider “remixing” genres and generic conventions to influence perceptions of control for future studies.
- Gamers know how to discuss video game agency, but it is useful to isolate a key term like control rather than broad terms like free will.

Importantly, these findings can be linked to my research and play study. The theoretical component of Finding One is proposed in Chapter Three, but the practical application was suggested by more experienced gamers in the play study. For example, some participants explicitly addressed the modding business model that relies on modders to improve extant video games. Finding Two can also be linked to the third and fourth chapters as certain participants expressed that sandbox games become tedious over time. Eventually, if a gamer is asked to keep playing, this fatigue might only be cured with more mods in order to maximize the most enjoyment. The theoretical support for Finding Three is once again suggested in Chapter Three, but its practical support can be observed in Chapter Five in which participants occasionally addressed games that meld generic conventions. As a gamer and a researcher, I will also provide a cursory list of games that I believe incorporate generic conventions in constructive ways. Finally, Finding Four suggests how to use experimental philosophy as a tool for exploring games. Ultimately, I believe experimental philosophy is an innovative field, but previous studies made the experience of describing phenomena confusing for participants. This play study allowed me to simplify terms for qualitative analysis, and future scholars may find such suggestions useful for their own research.

Mod Perceptions of Control and Their Uncertain Future

Based on the play study, mods can supplement or improve a video game experience. Some participants even suggested that mods fix an extant video game. While this is good news for mods and perceptions of control in video games like *Skyrim*, it raises another question: why do modders fix games when perhaps the company should be responsible for fixing them? Although not as prevalent as other themes in the play study, there are reasons to believe that perceptions of control are governed by the actual control wielded by the company who owns the content.

This relationship between actual and perceived control reveals that mods (and indeed many user-generated media) have always had a checkered history, and their future might be even more uncertain due to various social, economic, and legal concerns. Video game corporations usually will not take legal action or shut down mods if they benefit from mods, but even this notion has been recently challenged as evidenced by Take Two's, Rockstar Games' parent company, threat to shut down a popular *Grand Theft Auto 5* mod known as GooD-NTS in 2017. Rockstar and Take Two backed down, but the event reminded gamers who controls video game intellectual property, which includes mods (Kretzschmar and Stanfill 15).

The future of mods is uncertain because some video game corporations are aware that mods add value to their products. Using Valve's *Half-Life* as an example, Hector Postigo notes that "Valve benefits in that it captures value in not having to pay amateurs for their work whilst able to gain revenues from the royalties of successful games" (604). Ultimately, what is at stake with mods is a commodification of control in certain games because game developers are constantly finding ways to profit from the contributions of others. The recent push by large

corporations (including Valve) is for gamers to buy mods so that modders can be compensated. These "paid mods" have been met with so much resistance that they have yet to be adopted.

One recent example of mod commodification is Bethesda's own Creation Club for games like *Fallout* and *Skyrim* mentioned by Participant 26-M. Bethesda's official position rebukes the idea the Creation Club is a paid mod service in disguise:

> No. Mods will remain a free and open system where anyone can create and share what they'd like. Also, we won't allow any existing mods to be retrofitted into Creation Club, it must all be original content. Most of the Creation Club content is created internally, some with external partners who have worked on our games, and some by external Creators. All the content is approved, curated, and taken through the full internal dev cycle; including localization, polishing, and testing. This also guarantees that all content works together. We've looked at many ways to do "paid mods", and the problems outweigh the benefits. We've encountered many of those issues before. But, there's a constant demand from our fans to add more official high quality content to our games, and while we are able to create a lot of it, we think many in our community have the talent to work directly with us and create some amazing new things.

On the surface, Bethesda acknowledges the backlash for paid mods and attempts to reassure consumers that mods will remain free. However, Bethesda directly calls this content official, so are any of the Creation Club's features modifications? More to the point, even if Bethesda's Creation Club is a rebuttal to paid mods and their intentions are magnanimous, the message is clear: they are relying on modders to improve their games both in terms of free quality control and extended shelf lives under the guise that they will get to create something with the official team. This confirms that the company views mods as commodified control. At present, they are

positioning the works of others to increase their own products' lifespans, which is amusing in and of itself since *Skyrim* came out in 2011. Although a short teaser was announced for the next *Elder Scrolls* installment in 2018, it is clear it will be unavailable for several more years. It looks like *Skyrim* will continue to persist, and Bethesda has reached the point that it is publicly admitting that "high quality content" through the works of others necessitates the process by continually increasing demand for outdated technology. This is to say nothing about Bethesda's 2018 *Fallout 76*, which was so poorly received that modders are already contemplating if mods can even save it.

It is my belief that mods are creative endeavors and should continue to exist. My study also argues that experienced gamers feel they need mods once the experience with the base game stagnates. This suggests that in terms of perceptions of control, mods may lead to a greater sense of enjoyment. In terms of actual control, however, mods perpetuate illusory control as mods exist based on what developers will allow, and the developers ultimately make money from the works of others. If mods are necessary, it stands to reason that companies should hire more designers and programmers rather than relying on the contributions of hobbyists. Companies capitalize on the efforts of others without 1) giving them much in return and 2) preparing new games to promote innovation. If mods eventually lead to the sentiment of, "We need to mod your game to keep playing," it is possible that sandbox video games will expose lazy game design practices that are also unfair business practices. Nevertheless, studying and playing with mods can be rewarding as I learned in not only my own research, but my own experience with mods. However, the modding landscape is bound to become much more complicated and what implications this may have on future game design is both troubling and fascinating.

Ultimately, mods showcase the struggles of what gamers actually control in a modded game. It is difficult to verify or generalize this complex relationship based on this play study alone, though a few participants called out companies for not doing enough to fix their games. Future research targeting only expert players of modded video games, modders, and industry experts may flesh this idea out further. After all, despite the popularity of mods, companies are currently in the process of further commodifying them, thereby making the relationship even more complex. Mods can make games more immersive, enriching, or enjoyable, but there is a very real possibility that gamers will have to pay for them as if purchasing DLC for games. Once or if that happens, the company may control their experiences even more.

Asleep in the Sandbox: The Inevitability of Sandbox Fatigue?

I have a confession. I rarely finish sandbox games. I buy them, invest dozens (sometimes hundreds) of hours in them, but then I do not finish. Then I download mods and begin the process again. I like the games, but something eventually happens when the experience starts to feel like work. The same is true for *Skyrim*. I invested hundreds of hours into both modded and unmodded *Skyrim* and enjoyed my time with the game. While I do not imagine it will happen anytime soon due to overanalyzing something once loved for a dissertation, I can see myself playing it a few years from now. Part of the problem is I know my habits. I will say, “Let's do something different in this sandbox!” before I promptly go back to harvesting nirnroot, blue wildflowers, wheat, creep clusters, and giant's toes to make potions, sell them, and repeat the process all over again until it becomes mundane. In a 2009 *Gamasutra* article titled “The History and Theory of Sandbox Gameplay,” Steve Breslin further sheds some light on the reason:

> Where the sandbox is the main part of the game, sometimes the game is impossible to "master": instead you can just juke around with it until it grows tiresome. In this case, there's no artfully-crafted narrative, so no climax; there's no reward scheme or gameplay-building (such as technique-training and gradation of difficulty). All told, it is weak on conventional game-design fundamentals. The added freedom makes up for this to an extent, but the problems must still be addressed and overcome by the gameplay design itself.

Gamers' beliefs can show us that perceptions of control are related to game genres. Generally, there is an understanding that sandbox games allow more to do than other genres, even if gamers do not necessarily play them. Participants in my play study would point to this difference by comparing a sandbox game like *Skyrim* to games that they either play or that have a restrictive degree of agency. In fairness, Breslin's article is ten years old, so there is considerable room for interpretation now that video games have become more advanced. Additionally, a lack of a central narrative with a climax does not necessarily equal weak game design. However, even though ten years have passed, how far have we come if the genre is still primarily asking gamers to create their own fun, and then do it once again with mods when the original experience grows stale?

It seems that in terms of perceptions of control, mods are a double-edged sword. On one hand, they enhance control, as evidenced by immersion, enjoyment, or just providing something new to experience. Participants in my play study also pointed out that perceptions of control are generally much higher in open world sandbox games. On the other hand, mods may very well expose lazy game design as evidenced by the fact that the onus is on the modding community to improve sandbox games after the base game outlives its usefulness. As evidenced by the

responses from more experienced participants in my study, mods are a response to combat this issue. For games that do not provide mod support, the onus is on the design team to make an engaging experience in games where mods might be more distracting than useful. I am an advocate for mods and the modding community. I also appreciate sandbox video games. However, what if the problem lies in the genre itself? If the problem lies in the genre, whose responsibility is it to fix? The crux of the issue seems to be the need to preserve each game for as long as possible until its inevitable death. Strangely, however, mods can continually revive games as if they were undead zombies. Despite the contributions of mods, this approach might also produce a vicious cycle of "more of the same" as mods run their course and need to be stacked with other mods, even though gamers might perceive that they are doing more in these modded games.

Sandbox games are popular, and they will always have fervent fanbases. That said, it is possible that sandbox and franchise fatigue should be taken into consideration for future development. Internet searches of several large gaming communities, including Reddit, Giant Bomb, Resetera, and Steam, reveal that gamers have or are having these conversations as fans notice the repetitive nature of the genre. Of course, this conversation is largely subjective and one person criticizing a certain franchise will immediately be countered by another user who loves said franchise. Having said that, if mods are eventually required to enhance perceptions of control in sandbox games, what if the argument were instead shifted to games that bend genre conventions rather than adhering to them?

Stop Remixing Individual Games with Mods and Start Remixing Genres

"You have to be odd to be number one." – Dr. Seuss

I suspected before I launched my play study participants would explain that open world sandbox games like *Skyrim* offer greater perceptions of control and freedom than other genres. As explained in my previous point, that is what they are directly designed to do. However, as evidenced by my play study, participants compared games that either are not sandbox games or typically may not be modded. Gamers' beliefs can show us that perceptions of control are related to game genres. Participants would point to this difference by comparing a sandbox game like *Skyrim* to games that they either play or have a more restrictive sense of agency. Sandbox games undoubtedly offer greater perceptions of control due to the sizes of their worlds. However, size is generally the genre's defining feature. For other genres, there is usually a killer app or feature that defines it and makes it unique. Fighting games are known for their tight controls and finesse. Racing and air simulators are also known for their tight controls. First-person shooters are known for their response time. Japanese RPGs are traditionally known for turn-based combat. Stealth games rely on, well, stealth mechanics. The list goes on. For sandbox games, the sandbox is that feature. Sandbox games are creative and expansive endeavors, but unlike other genres, they do not explicitly master a certain feature or quality that another genre or game series might be known for. I suspect that game designers and researchers will wish to explore the potential of video games as thought experiments for future research (suggested by Schulzke in Chapter Two) in order to probe perceptions of freedom and control in games. However, we cannot rely on sandbox games for this because as my participants revealed, this might never be a one size fits all concept since all gamers have their favorite titles that they will discuss. Ultimately, maybe we

need to step out of the sandbox and explore how genre-melders allow us to ask new questions of agency and enjoyment.

In a humorous exchange in *Thinking About Video Games: Interviews with the Experts*, David S. Heineman asks video game designer Eugene Jarvis about opportunities and challenges going forward in the industry. Jarvis delineates what he believes is a problem despite advanced interactivity and graphics:

> Obviously, the holy grail is the holodeck. Virtual reality is a big thing, and there's the creativity of new game paradigms, and I guess we have seen this huge explosion with touch screens. But, really, we have these huge high-resolution screens now, and it's amazing how 98 percent of all innovation goes to create more eye candy. The game really doesn't change; it's like *Madden*. *Madden* is kind of a paradigm for the whole industry: "It's still f…ing football. It's still eleven guys. They just look better." In some ways, we're doing that. We're all, like any entertainment medium, telling stories, trying to make that same old cool story. The creative side of things hasn't really caught up. We're all still just making the same old f…ing game. (62)

Recall that Chapter Three argued that part of the reason why mods are popular in sandbox games is because they are "remixes" that produce a greater sense of control, which the company views as a commodity. What if the danger of open world sandbox games is that the same ideas and mechanics are recycled? Although sandbox games strive for greater perceptions of control, perhaps designers need to be more creative with their productions. It is possible that a way around conversations about perceptions of control with mods and sandbox fatigue would be for designers to continue to create games that blur generic conventions. As the second portion of the play study indicated, gamers tend to describe interactivity using familiar games, genres, or

generic conventions. Many participants discussed perceptions of control in these terms in their interviews, which could be the result of marketing and series promotion. Genre conventions are not sacrosanct, but they sometimes appear that way, especially when a series becomes known for a specific characteristic.

The evolution of game genres is similar to other forms of media, such as movies and music. After all, according to Espen Aarseth, "To pinpoint a genre's origin is to define the genre, not to discover it" (97). Game genres begin as unpolished, but transform over the years when they become a mode of classification defined through certain characteristics or traits. Once this occurs, boundaries start to blur as elements from one genre find their way into another, whether purposely or accidentally. Yet there is a tendency to suggest that any genre is completely pure as all games can benefit from an occasional transformation. Genres are useful, and so long as they do not lead to arguments about limiting definitions about what games should be, they are helpful for exploring the rich possibilities presented in video game studies that address agency.

Mark J.P. Wolf writes, "As genres grow and expand, they inevitably begin to break up into a series of subgenres" (260). Wolf also notes that a list of genres and all subgenres is outside the scope of his project (260). Nevertheless, the games that do meld or "remix" genres often receive considerable attention (or, in some cases, notoriety). There are many games and series that have accomplished such a feat. Participant 9-U briefly discussed Konami's *Castlevania* during their interview as a game where "you can only go forward through the puzzle game." Originally released as a 2-D side-scroller in 1986, *Castlevania* has often flirted with 3-D graphics, advanced character and weapons customization, narrative cutscenes, and even RPG elements like leveling up. Later installments also possess open world aspects as gamers can explore previous locations to their heart's content. In an interesting twist perhaps unbeknownst to

Participant 9-U, the series producer, Koji Igarashi, departed Konami in 2014. In 2015, he raised $5.5 million on Kickstarter to fund *Bloodstained: Ritual of the Night*, an unofficial *Castlevania* game created by the official *Castlevania* team.[17]

Participant 2-M discussed Atlus' critically acclaimed RPG *Persona 5* during their interview. Although the franchise is popular today (including forays into competent dancing simulators and fighting games), the series was dormant for six years after the release of 2000's *Eternal Punishment*. *Persona 3* redefined itself to incorporate dungeon crawler and dating simulation characteristics for which the series has become known.

Simulation elements are also quite popular in contemporary sports games as evidenced by Participant 20-M's discussion of *FIFA 2K*:

> Or, like, if you choose Nike as your sponsor, you can only wear their shoes, like, 100% of the time. So, for me, I don't like that, because it goes back to what you were talking about with the restrictions. I really don't like that. Like, how I was playing the game [*Skyrim*], since I like to do side missions, or hunting and stuff like that, which is more fun to me. So, I would choose—I forgot the name. It wasn't Gatorade. It was a smaller company. I got paid less money, but I can wear whatever clothes I want. Customization is important to me and my character. So, yeah. I like to be free. I usually don't choose Nike either as my sponsor.

Although *FIFA 2K* is predominately a sports game, these simulation elements provided Participant 20-M with personal emergent narratives that allowed them to not only play the game based on their predilections, but also may reflect how they wish to see themselves presented in

[17] See https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/iga/bloodstained-ritual-of-the-night.

the game world. Sports games have featured such elements for years, but perhaps no series was more ambitious than Konami and 2K's *MLB Power Pros*. The series combined official Major League Baseball stat-tracking with role-playing game elements. The second Western release, *MLB Power Pros 2008*, combined not one but two role-playing games. "Success Mode" centers on a narrative about the player working his way up from AAA into the pros while the second mode is a continuation of the first as they hone their skills on a Major League Baseball team. Even though the series is much more popular in Japan than the West, it still retains a niche following due to its complexities.

Other games like *Red Dead Redemption* incorporated mini-games like Poker, Horseshoes, and arm wrestling. *Resident Evil 7* bucked previous installments and utilized a first-person perspective. As a result, the game's grindhouse horror elements added terror not seen in the series. *Danganronpa* combined visual novel, trial game, and dating simulator aspects to create a unique take on murder mysteries. David Cage's *Heavy Rain* relies on annoying quick-time events to advance gameplay (QTEs), but the main narrative could change over the course of the game depending on the actions or inactions of the game's four primary characters. The farming game *Stardew Valley* combines farming, building, creating, relationship-building, and exploring conventions in what many gamers consider to be among the strongest independent games around.

For the purposes of this dissertation and sandbox video games, perhaps no series currently melds generic conventions more effortlessly than Sega's *Yakuza* series. *Yakuza* features an open world environment, but agency is confined to one specific section of Tokyo called Kamurocho, much like the *Persona* series or *Life Is Strange*. Gamers are free to explore this world, but a tight narrative centering on underground crime and betrayal occasionally prods them

along over the course of each chapter. However, while the main narrative of *Yakuza* is serious, the plethora of humorous side quests erases much of this tension. The gamer can sing karaoke, dance at a disco, spend time at a batting cage, bowl, operate a cabaret club, and even forge friendships with some of the city's residents. At its core, *Yakuza* is a fighting game (with RPG elements), but the manners in which it combines many genres into a competent and cohesive gaming experience make it a great example of what video game genres may strive for in the future.

There are other games that try, fail, and yet somehow succeed due to their disregard for generic conventions. One such game is *Deadly Premonition*. While a *Twin Peaks*-inspired survival horror game, *Deadly Premonition* throws a lot of weirdness at gamers for the sake of being weird. The designers programmed driving simulator mechanics that required the gamer to drive to key areas (and occasionally run out of gas in the process). The driving mechanics were clunky, but if they were improved, the experience could have been different. *Deadly Premonition*'s more ambitious feature is that the town of Greenvale is open world, and the gamer can take the time to get to know its zany residents. Ultimately, *Deadly Premonition* makes it to this list because some gamers cannot decide if it is a terrible or brilliant game.[18]

Combining genre conventions to influence perceptions of control also faces some backlash. Some companies do not wish to do it because it is hard work. Others do not want to do it because such features might upset their fanbase. Earnest Adams offers a caveat and writes, "A game needs to be true to itself, so a truly hybrid game may need to mix challenges that aren't typically presented together. But don't mix characteristics of different genres without good

[18] See https://www.destructoid.com/review-deadly-premonition-165168.phtml.

reason; a game should cross genres only if it genuinely needs to as part of the gameplay" (72). While this is great advice, it also suggests that generic conventions are sacrosanct, which should be constantly attacked for the sake of innovation in video games. Combining genres can be risky, but it also produces the most opportunities for enjoyment and continued analysis of the evolution of perceptions of control in video games. Adams agrees and writes, "However, you should not allow these genre descriptions to circumscribe your creativity—especially at the concept stage" (72). Ultimately, mods provide a great array of resources for the ongoing discourse of agency in video games. However, perhaps we should also have another parallel discourse on how designers can meet or exploit those conventions by introducing more games that blur genre boundaries.

It is important to note that many of the above games are Japanese. At present, I cannot make the claim that Japanese companies are more likely to meld genres to produce new experiences rather than invite modders to mod their games. However, as of January 2019, the Japanese government has made it illegal to mod consoles in Japan, which could result in fines or prison time.[19] For all the cynicism that might come with the relationship between modders, companies, and sandbox games, this power move will have to be explored in future research.

Qualitative Study Suggestions for Agency Terminology

This dissertation might also provide suggestions for asking better questions in experimental philosophy. Most participants appeared more than willing to discuss their understanding of their perceptions of control in games. Some experimental philosophy studies

[19] See https://www.destructoid.com/review-deadly-premonition-165168.phtml.

that discuss concepts like free will and agency are dense, double-barreled, or both. Below is the scenario provided by Miller and Feltz for what they hoped participants would analyze:

> *Prevention*. Mr. Green wants Mr. Jones, the security guard, to allow Mrs. Green's car to be stolen at 12:00am on October 7th. Mr. Green doesn't entirely trust Mr. Jones to allow the job to happen, so he has taken some extraordinary measures. Before Mr. Green informed Mr. Jones of his plan to have the car stolen, Mr. Green consulted neuroscientists who implanted a device in Mr. Jones's brain without Mr. Jones's knowledge. This device is programmed to block any efforts on Mr. Jones's part that might lead to his preventing the theft. If Mr. Jones even begins to try to prevent the theft, the device will knock him unconscious until the car has been stolen. However, as it happens, Mr. Jones makes no effort to prevent the theft; at exactly 12:00am, the car is stolen just as Mr. Green wanted. Since Mr. Jones makes no effort to prevent the theft, the device did not block any efforts, nor did it cause Mr. Jones to lose consciousness. However, if Mr. Jones had even begun to make any effort to prevent the theft, then the device would have knocked him unconscious, and Mr. Jones would have failed to prevent the theft anyway. (405-406)

Not only are participants asked to consider such a complex scenario, but after comprehending the scenario and information, they had to consider more material:

> (a) Could Mr. Jones have done anything to prevent the theft? and (b) Was it possible for Mr. Jones to prevent the theft? Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement on a seven-point Likert scale with versions of (i)–(iv) in which the phrase 'the theft' replaced the phrase 'deciding to steal the car'. (406)

Agency is already a complex subject, but an approach like this might be too difficult for many participants to comprehend. As such, qualitative questions concerning agency should be clarified as much as possible, or arguments at least should not be constructed in manners in which only philosophers or philosophy students might understand. For qualitative video game philosophy, it is best to focus on one major theme like control rather than broad and confusing terms like free will, determinism, and compatibilism. In fact, only one participant in my play study (Participant 10-M) explicitly mentioned determinism and compatibilism in an unprovoked manner. Originally, this qualitative study was interested in free will, but it took several edits of the questions before the dissertation's true intent developed. It was helpful to focus on control and avoid confusing double-barreled questions. Ultimately, game studies has much to contribute to philosophical perceptions of agency. However, the questions or prompts need to be simplistic to ensure the participant can respond to the best of their abilities.

Further, this play study was conducted on a small sample size at a very large university in Central Florida. Questions of control and freedom can reveal more about various demographics (of gamers) if more studies are conducted in different regions. As gamers come from diverse backgrounds, it would be interesting to systematically investigate how opinions, beliefs, feelings, or intuitions would change or remain constant for gamers from diverse backgrounds. Perceptions of agency in physical and digital worlds is an exciting topic for interdisciplinary research, albeit one that requires a great deal of work for the design team as well as tremendous levels of trust for the participants.

Limitations

Although this qualitative play study provided intriguing information on video game mods, gamer perceptions of control, and video game design, it is important to address limitations to this study. First, the participation goal for this play study was 32 participants, but I fell just short at 27. This is predominately because the play study was conducted in the months of June and July. Since qualitative research does not have pre-defined guidelines for recruiting participants, the number of participants can range from one to several hundred depending on the research as well as what prior scholars have written on recruitment methods (Creswell 126). Recruitment in summer semesters is harder than fall or spring semesters, so I was fortunate to receive as much interest as I did (it should be noted that 47 individuals finished the intake questionnaire/first consent form, but 20 did not follow through with scheduling an appointment). Summer research is possible, but it requires a bit more planning and patience than either fall or spring.

Second, the timing of the play study produced a wide array of participants because the only inclusionary criterion was that the participants had to identify as gamers. This had little impact on responses that addressed perceptions of control through negative and positive freedom and video game genre conventions as these were strong. However, if this play study had more participants that had experience with *Skyrim*, the data on video game mods and perceptions of control would have been even stronger. This will be something to keep in mind for future research on video game mods.

Third, the "Interesting NPCs" mod was simply too large for one hour of playtime. Only four participants even encountered some component of it, and each did so accidentally (even

fewer reported that they were looking for it). Future research would have to address this mod differently than what my play study attempted. At the very least, some playthroughs showed how expansive this mod is. However, a longitudinal exploratory study focused solely on large mods might help as one hour of playtime was clearly not enough for participants to provide any insight on this topic. This hypothetical study would also need expert players of *Skyrim* who have invested 100s of hours into the game or continue to play to this day.

Fourth, character and gender analyses might have to be better represented in future studies on video game mods. Inigo was praised by those who found him. Some participants had nice things to say about Sofia (i.e. her quest-specific dialogue), but she is a mod that requires gender analysis in future research because some participants (all males) pointed out that she provided fanservice to predominately male audiences. Although this does not take away from the creative work of her developers, the question remains if she aids or hinders gender representation in video games.

Fifth, participants immediately or gradually developed competency with the chosen Xbox controller. However, some participants stated that they preferred to play PC games with a keyboard and mouse. For the sake of consistency, everyone played with the controller, but future studies may wish to provide multiple controllers if only to promote personal comfort.

Finally, such a study as this might benefit from a follow-up with certain participants. As previously explained, some participants were avid fans of *Skyrim* while others never played before. Some inexperienced gamers noted that this study made them want to play *Skyrim* in the future. Although this revelation is not useful for the current study, it might be interesting to follow up with them in the future to see if they managed to do so. This suggestion might allow

them to reconsider previous responses, or to even see if the incorporation of the same mods would impact their overall experience.

Suggestions for Future Research

Despite their roles and appearances in an uncertain gaming future, mods will continue to enhance perceptions of control in video games once the mod becomes a supplement or even need as the base game runs its course. This means that more research should be conducted on mods in future studies. This play study only sought to analyze the impacts of three narrative add-on mods in one game that has thousands of mods available for download. Based on Alexander's Unger taxonomy outlined in Chapter One, this means that there are three additional types of mods: mutators/tweaks, "mods," and total conversions. Each of these mods manipulates the game's code in manners just as unique as the narrative add-ons chosen for the *Skyrim* play study. Further, this study did not explore the impact that gameplay and aesthetic mods may have on user experience. These mods might include hundreds of options for character customization, changes in battle strategy, alterations in enemy or NPC AI, or even tweaks that modify the game's graphics. Armed with thousands of mods and multiple games to choose from, scholars may find that the opportunities for qualitative mod research is limitless (although as I learned throughout the dissertation process, scaling back on lofty ambitions will provide the best data). After research on more narrative, aesthetic, and gameplay mods has been conducted on sandbox games and other genres, perhaps more complex studies could be conducted that examine what happens when participants "stack" mods of all varieties into their games.

Additionally, this study revealed that another interview question could be tailored towards experienced gamers. As previously explained, some of the participants were open about their modding experience. For future research, a qualitative study towards experienced gamers could shed even more light on modding perceptions of control. Such questioning could be, "When did you begin to mod this game?" or, "Why did you feel it was important to mod this game?" Although I could not use these questions for every participant in this study, they are useful for future participants who mod video games.

As stated in the methodology portion of the first chapter, individual interviews were conducted to situate the data in relation to the dissertation. Now that this play study provides examples of how participants discuss mods and perceptions of control and freedom in academic, IRB-approved research, future studies will want to triangulate this data with information provided by Internet forum or blog posts to compare opinions in formal and informal spaces. Additionally, such data would be useful for framing larger discussions about video game philosophy, mods, and genre studies to support, challenge, or transform my current conclusions.

Future research will also want to incorporate different philosophical and psychological perceptions of freedom. As this dissertation demonstrated, there is a vast landscape of freedom in video games, and, despite my incorporation of many terms, I merely stepped into a section of this discourse. Comparisons between cultures and genres may reveal how gamers might interpret their choices. For example, how gamers interpret events or options in various genres has a bearing on the narratives we tell about these games, so we might discuss freedom in terms of how we think about choices instead of the making of the choices themselves. Other scholars may wish to look at different philosophers and scholars altogether to answer questions of freedom. For example, a future researcher may wish to incorporate a Kantian sense of freedom that posits

an action is autonomous if an agent acts with reason.[20] This research could be intriguing for ethical or moral perceptions of freedom. There might also be room to discuss freedom from the standpoint of flow-like states. For example, a gamer may become so adept that their skill becomes intuitive rather than conscious. Eventually, this immersive state might be defined as a space of freedom that will change with expertise. Although this dissertation inferred this connection, future research will want to explore flow as a conduit for freedom in greater detail. As a final example, while I discussed Janet Murray's concept of immersion in detail, she also suggests media transformation "makes us eager for masquerade, eager to pick up the joystick and become a cowboy or a space fighter, eager to log on to the MUD and become ElfGirl or BlackDagger" (154). As transformation allows for operative role-playing within a digital world, the effectiveness of the simulated environment to make such criteria possible could be vital to gamer perceptions of control and freedom in future studies.

Although my intent was to incorporate qualitative data into my play study, mods might also benefit from quantitative instruments as well. Some of these might include instruments that measure narrative transportation, flow, immersion, and lesser known tools like Peter Vorderer's character attachment scale (Rogers, Dillman Carpentier, and Barnard 32). These phenomena are all linked to perceptions of control, so additional research could reveal more insights on video game modifications.

To conclude, my evolving relationship with video game perceptions of control should have been on full display over the course of this dissertation. There were days when I thought a game might be able to offer radical choice, only to be reminded that this is determined by if I

[20] See https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-moral/

choose whether or not to locate a strategy guide, which would ruin any sense of immersion. There were other days when I believed that no choices in games matter because they are inherently deterministic. I accepted a more compatibilistic position before I was somehow sucked into *The Matrix* and Cartesian thought about games (fortunately, this was a brief detour). Eventually, I began to analyze agency in games from the standpoint of control, negative freedom, and positive freedom. It took my interactions with all my participants to force me to evaluate my own relationship with media with which I have interacted since the age of three.

I am not the first scholar to analyze mods, nor will I be the last. However, whether as supplements or needs, several participants expressed a willingness to discuss how mods impacted their experiences with *Skyrim*. Additionally, participants were willing and able to discuss the differences between perceptions of control in physical and digital environments. Evidence suggests that these perceptions change depending on genres and generic conventions, which highlights how ingrained these expectations are to agency. There are, however, many questions that remain after a dissertation such as this. How might perceptions of control or mod accessibility change if video game corporations push to commodify all mods? What happens when participants become fatigued with genres, especially those with abundant mod support? Despite the challenges of combining genres, what sort of sub-genres and games have yet to be developed, and what might these games say about gamer perceptions of control? How will mods, genres, and genre-fusing influence the landscape of virtual reality? Finally, what sort of philosophical questions might be asked in future studies if scholars incorporate qualitative video game research? It is my belief that these questions are intricately linked, and their interactions will provide some guidance for complex perceptions of agency as video game technology becomes increasingly sophisticated. How we answer all of these will have an impact on both

video game design and the changing needs of gamers. After all, even though video games will never be able to offer radical free will, what they can provide in terms of perceptions of control and freedom are arguably more important to the debate of agency in new media.

APPENDIX: IRB APPROVAL OF HUMAN RESEARCH LETTER FOR PLAY STUDY

University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board
Office of Research & Commercialization
12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501
Orlando, Florida 32826-3246
Telephone: 407-823-2901 or 407-882-2276
www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html

Approval of Human Research

From: **UCF Institutional Review Board #1**
FWA00000351, IRB00001138

To: **Mark J Kretzschmar**:

Date: **June 07, 2018**

Dear Researcher:

On 06/07/2018 the IRB approved the following human participant research until 06/06/2019 inclusive:

Type of Review:	UCF Initial Review Submission Form Expedited Review
Project Title:	Measuring Player Perceptions of Agential Control in Modded and Unmodded Versions of Bethesda' s Skyrim: A Qualitative Play Study
Investigator:	Mark J Kretzschmar
IRB Number:	SBE-18-14018
Funding Agency:	Texts and Technology Dissertation Award
Grant Title:	N/A
Research ID:	N/A

The scientific merit of the research was considered during the IRB review. The Continuing Review Application must be submitted 30days prior to the expiration date for studies that were previously expedited, and 60 days prior to the expiration date for research that was previously reviewed at a convened meeting. Do not make changes to the study (i.e., protocol, methodology, consent form, personnel, site, etc.) before obtaining IRB approval. A Modification Form **cannot** be used to extend the approval period of a study. All forms may be completed and submitted online at https://iris.research.ucf.edu .

If continuing review approval is not granted before the expiration date of 06/06/2019, approval of this research expires on that date. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request in iRIS so that IRB records will be accurate.

Use of the approved, stamped consent document(s) is required. The new form supersedes all previous versions, which are now invalid for further use. Only approved investigators (or other approved key study personnel) may solicit consent for research participation. Participants or their representatives must receive copy of the consent form(s).

All data, including signed consent forms if applicable, must be retained and secured per protocol for a minimum of five years (six if HIPAA applies) past the completion of this research. Any links to the identification of participants should be maintained and secured per protocol. Additional requirements may be imposed by your funding agency, your department, or other entities. Access to data is limited to authorized individuals listed as key study personnel.

In the conduct of this research, you are responsible to follow the requirements of the Investigator Manual.

This letter is signed by:

Signature applied by Gillian Morien on 06/07/2018 11:41:08 AM EDT

Designated Reviewer

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