The suspension of disbelief in videogames

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

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Abstract:

This thesis explores the ways in which suspension of disbelief works in digital games. Primarily concerned with how players relate imaginatively to the often major dissonance between gameplay and narrative in digital games, this thesis questions how the literate players of games reconcile these complex texts imaginatively. Proposing that Samuel Taylor Coleridge's concept of suspension of disbelief is a complicated process often cited rhetorically rather than given its theoretical due, this thesis aims to rehabilitate the term and turn it into a useful, sharpened tool for games studies. Digital games themselves are also seen to be an intense new realm of possibilities for the suspension of disbelief, and textual analysis of games which approach the fourth wall or the suspension of disbelief on their own terms helps to make this clear.

 Beginning by defining the differences of games compared to other media, the thesis goes on to define suspension of disbelief in both its historical and modern contexts and see how it fits with games, isolating three key problems with uniting the concept with the medium. The three chapters which follow looked in more depth at the problems of the skilled reader, fundamental activity and dissonance through investigations into games' textual construction, the mindsets they engender in players and their reformulation of the fourth wall. The final section looks at the conclusions working together to achieve the dual aims of proposing a new model for game reading which centres around a willed disavowal of presence on the part of the gamer combined with the gamer's taking up of a role offered by the game-text, and rehabilitating both the term and the concept of suspension of disbelief.

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Acknowledgements:

For

Mum, who saves me from myself

and

Dad, who reads it very well.

Introduction

This is a thesis about suspension of disbelief: a difficult term with rhetorical weight, poetic construction and something at its core which seems at once highly amorphous and very true. This thesis looks at applying suspension of disbelief in videogames. It's not the first time the term has been mentioned or explicitly turned on this medium, and often those writing about it don't even realise that it's key to what they're writing about. Suspension of disbelief and how it works in games had seemed to me the elephant in the room in the discourse of games studies for some time when I first began writing this thesis. The temperature of the discussions then were a result of many arguments regarding the dissonance that exists between gameplay and narrative.

Videogames are an evolution of a primal urge to play within defined structures of rules. They are also a narrative form gradually growing into the dramatic potential which the medium holds. They often overextend themselves or experiment with new narrative approaches. Jesper Juul (2005) is right to define videogames as a space of interplay between 'real rules and fictional worlds', and his work builds on early games theorists' perspectives in establishing the boundaries and intersections of these two distinct spheres. Espen Aarseth's early 'ludologist' contention

> If these texts redefine literature by expanding our notion of it--and I believe that they do--then they must also redefine what is literary, and therefore they cannot be measured by an old, unmodified aesthetics. (1997, p.22)

was met by Janet Murray's assertion that

> Games are always stories, even abstract games such as checkers or Tetris, which are about winning and losing, casting the player as the opponent-battling or environment-battling hero. (1998, p.2)

This sentiment came alongside her famous reading of *Tetris* as a metaphor for the harassed lives of 1990's Americans. In his developing of the ludologist perspective, Juul took Aarseth's work on games as a starting point:

> Computer games are not narratives....Rather the narrative tends to be isolated from or even work against the computer-game-ness of the game. (Juul 1998, p.1)

Having to use terms like 'computer-game-ness' is a common problem faced by the games academic who suddenly realises their theorising has reached the point where scaffolding still needs to be built. The compound word acts as a placeholder for work still to be done regarding the nature of computer games and their position relative to other texts. It over-generalises computer game form and skips over many subtleties that make up how it feels to engage with one. The specific relationship that makes up the feeling of 'computer game-ness' exists between the person interacting with the text and the text itself. It takes up the link in the chain between text and reader that we'd usually fill with the term 'suspension of disbelief'. Juul evolves his position, and begins building some of these foundations when later in his work he accepts that games construct fictional worlds simultaneously alongside rules structures. Caveats are attached to this observation; that the fictive and the narrative are distinct from one another, narrative being procedural, and "rules and fiction are attractive for opposite reasons" (2005, p.121) leading to the argument that "most videogames are ruled and make-believe."(ibid, p.13). Juul's eventual refined take on the fictive potential of videogames is less all-encompassing, but still maintains the primacy of games as separate from traditional media:

> Video games project incomplete and sometimes incoherent worlds. Game fiction is ambiguous, optional and imagined by the player in uncontrollable and unpredictable ways, but the emphasis on fictional worlds may be the strongest innovation of the video game. (2005, p.163)

Although 'computer-game-ness' is now happily absent, there is still a lot of chaos and difficulty in this definition of the fictive side of videogames as ambiguous, optional and imagined. Further observation of these models needs to be done in order to bring into focus

what truly separates games from other media. Juul's major contribution to the debate so far was to frame games as spaces where rules and fiction interact and intermingle, rather than battlegrounds where one aspect dominates or struggles with the other. My intention in this thesis is to illuminate the interactive process that transmits these textual features to the player, and interprets their actions in its turn.

Specifically, my focus is on rhetorics of suspension of disbelief, a term coined by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. When I began work on this thesis, my hypothesis was that suspension of disbelief was a lens through which we could better understand the player/text relationship. Over the course of writing and looking at suspension of disbelief more generally, my perspective has shifted somewhat. Suspension of disbelief was a good way of looking at discourse of the time, polarised as it was between those who saw games as a new literary form and those who wanted to defend their unique qualities. Even now that games are generally accepted as distinct from other media types and their workings appreciated as more subtle than a butting of gameplay into narrative, the lens of suspension of disbelief still provides some interesting reconciliation which would otherwise have been missed. The suspension of disbelief game has a steep learning curve, and playing it for four years has led me to see numerous different ways in which the term is relevant and potentially usefully applicable to modern videogames. It bridges old media with new, connects the psychology of hermeneutics to the business of textual construction, ties into games' claim to artistic status and makes sense of some outstanding elements of games which I'd never really been able to explain before. It impacts very directly on our relationships with game characters and the meanings we can take away from playing games. The chapters which follow make up an earnest, evolutionary process of trying to understand without fear or favour first the term itself and then its applicability to games. Determined at first to reconcile ludo-narrative dissonance I define the term, define games' difference and then try to connect suspension of disbelief with games given these differences, in order to see what's special or particular about a gamer's suspension of disbelief. That's why what's new about my approach is that games and games studies are approached not as a narrativist or a ludologist, and not with an agenda or model to push around the suspension of disbelief, but from the perspective that suspension of disbelief is a process that needs to be reconciled with games, and can be fruitfully applied once this occurs. I now believe that an appreciation of a ludic sense of

suspension of disbelief is something designers should be aware of, especially those who want to tell stories through the medium of the videogame. I've been happily disabused of my early notions that a reconstituted suspension of disbelief represented a panacea which would enable us to read dissonance differently or resolve it completely, but I feel the concept has, through the conclusions that are reached, solidified into useful features of the gaming experience that needed to be highlighted from this perspective.

Narrative as a 'Unique Selling Point' of games has grown in popularity in the modern games industry , with compelling storylines often used to try and make games of a reliable and safe genre stand-out in a commercial context within the crowded game marketplace. It is, however, important in the heat of debate and analysis not to forget the experience of the reader, user, player, role-player as a central component of textual engagement. As testament to this, the term 'gamer' is used sparingly in this thesis to distinguish the literate player from the generic player or the game fan[1].   While Juul's focus is on textual construction itself, his new appreciation of games as complex spaces where traditional concepts of gameplay collide with fictional representations does not emphasise how these texts are physically engaged with by the player. Observing primarily from the perspective of of suspension of disbelief, this thesis examines the act of engagement in the context of games through diverse lenses and attempt to isolate some of its fundamental facets at work in the act of interpretation. Suspension of disbelief is a useful filter for this purpose because it touches upon a lot of different features of games, from their representational elements and the act of interfacing with an interactive text to our relationship with gameplay patterns and the expectations we hold of narrative forms.

Such a focus is designed to better explain what Juul is suggesting when he runs out of words and reaches for 'the computer game-ness of the game', in his attempt to isolate that ephemeral, unique quality that boundaries these new texts off from all that has come before. The intellectual gear that drives this thesis is not so much defining the different

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[1] To clarify : Throughout this thesis, the term 'player' is used to denote the audience or interactor component of games as a system, while 'gamer' is used exclusively to refer to the literate player, the player who suspends their disbelief. This, too, is distinct from the term 'fan', which is on the other end of the scale, denoting a gamer who can indulge elements otherwise kept in check through the necessity of their position as player. The distinction of role-players and their angle on these player definitions is explored in chapter five (page 207).

elements of the game form but rather the interplay between these various components. In a previous paper I (Brown 2007) attempted to describe a way of reading game-texts *in medias res* as spaces of 'authored gestalt interplay' between what Craig Lindley (2002) described as a 'gameplay gestalt', and the storyline properties of games, which were observed to be functioning as a separate 'narrative gestalt'. This position shares much in common with that expressed in Dominic Arsenault and Bernard Perron's (2009) concept of the 'magic cycle' gameplay model, which merges gameplay, narrative and hermeneutics, and constitutes part of the building blocks of the arguments played out throughout this thesis. Emphasis is put upon an experiential model because it does much of the heavy lifting that allows for the discussion of something as ephemeral and multi-layered as the concept of suspension of disbelief. It was my intention in the (Brown 2007) paper to make explicit that playing a game engenders a combination of gameplay and narrative. Connecting this idea with the interpretative act often referred to as 'suspension of disbelief' that seems common to both games and fiction (discussed in relation to both in chapters one and two) ignited this research. Over the course of writing this thesis, the same problem has thrown up numerous different questions and perspectives. Suspension of disbelief is itself one of the great battleground terms of literary studies, media studies and aesthetic philosophy; lionised, probed, deconstructed and dismissed by scholars from diverse backgrounds with an interest in how audiences approach texts. A secondary goal of this thesis is to attempt a renewal of the term and its relevance to games since, as psychologist Norman N. Holland, who has spent a career studying the concept neatly puts it

> Coleridge's phrase, "willing suspension of disbelief," has lasted more than two centuries, probably because it describes very well what we *feel* is happening in a lot of situations that Coleridge could never have imagined. (2009, p.61)

Four years later I do continue to subscribe to the importance of suspension of disbelief as a way of looking at fiction, games in particular, and the strange fascination we have with them. Besides its actual academic or analytical value, which I consider still to be quite high, especially when applied to a new and growing media such as games. The phrase is used willy-nilly (outside of its many viable contexts or defined on the fly) by those writing about games and interactivity from all manner of perspectives. Often it is used entirely for its value

as a rhetorical tool or to leverage its 'literary' cachet. While the ways in which it is used are themselves interesting (and examined at length in chapters two and four), this thesis contributes to the debate by moving it forward through a more in-depth look at what it might mean to suspend one's disbelief when playing a game.

 Games need players, and this is one of the ways they are differentiated from the majority of other media experiences which require only audiences. Tanya Krzywinska and Barry Atkins (2008, p.6) take the line that "The text has no life of its own without player engagement; without the player a game is simply dead code", and their evolution of Laura Ermi and Frans Mäyrä's (2005) earlier assertion that games have no existence whatsoever without players showcases the subtle shift in viewpoint that is occurring in the field. Specifically, theorists are moving from a thorough examination of the entities engaged with to a wider view of the player(s) and game as a whole interacting unit. This shift in emphasis is being driven not only by games studies establishing itself as a coherent field in its own right, but also, I would argue, more subtly by elements of the form itself, especially, as is shown in this thesis, the contours of its suspension of disbelief. The narratology and ludology debate is now for the archives, and more and wider scholars appreciate the representational, meaningful and procedural side of games. This move is crucial if we are to ever really understand games on the terms they present to us, and appreciate them at their own level, rather than from the heights of various competing ivory towers. The study of dead code, or even running code, is not the object of this research. Its goals are less concerned with the internal operation or construction of game-texts than with the way their workings are perceived by gamers, yet it is not a study *of* players in a sociological sense. Regardless of critical persuasion, the requirement of an outside agency to manipulate or change the game's state is a crucial part of the form, far moreso than an audience in drama or a reader in literature (this is examined in depth during chapter four). While it assuredly remains a game, nonetheless any given game is incomplete without a player and this commonality provides the starting point for examining how players relate to games. Direct criticism of games as entirely narrative or entirely ludic forms begins to crumble and become redundant, since just as many valid similarities to narrative forms observable in games can be countered by assertions regarding the fundamental workings of the medium. This is showcased when Gordon Calleja discusses Julian Kücklich's easy and direct

correlation of the suspension of disbelief from fiction to digital games, a point that highlights how specific of a problem this thesis aims to solve:

> Kücklich (2006) does not offer an explanation of how Coleridge's popular phrase is applicable to the analysis of digital games, collapsing the complex experiences they enable into those of an altogether different medium. (2008, p.93)

Instead of importing these concepts wholesale, they must be observed in games on their own terms, as they should be in any given medium. Calleja does somewhat over extend the argument in the above citation, since Coleridge's concept was always intended to be applied more widely than literature, forming part of his writings on aesthetic philosophy. When Coleridge's body of work is examined, his struggles and concerns regarding the ramifications of suspension of disbelief can be teased out (examined in detail in chapter two). The role of traditional concepts of players, audiences, authors and fictional worlds need to be re-evaluated in light of modern videogames and this thesis aims to begin such re-evaluation. This research, then, is an avowal of the principles behind both the opening statements of this introduction, even though at first glance they appear diametrically opposed: accepting the inherent fictive quality of games on their own terms, while focusing on how they redefine textual engagement.

Through a process of technological innovation, digital games have evolved to become a medium of storytelling without necessarily sacrificing their intrinsically ludic elements. The strange union of rules and narrative structures has produced gamers who fuel fast-expanding commercial game markets, desiring big-budget titles with production values sometimes outstripping even Hollywood. Increasingly over the last four years gamers have embraced being entertained by these new multiform texts; simultaneously deriving pleasure from exploring their workings, testing their skill against others and using them as a conduit for fantasy, socialising and role-play. The diversification of the games market over the four years in which I have been writing this thesis has been phenomenal. The restrictive nature of the rules and systems which necessarily make up the core of these entities do not at first appear the best of bedfellows with traditional narrative delivery and notions of

imagination or fantasy. They certainly do not align well with traditional narrative models, as Aarseth bitterly insists:

> What better way to map the territory than by using the trusty, dominant paradigm of stories and storytelling? The story perspective has many benefits: it is safe, trendy, and flexible. In a (Western) world troubled by addiction, attention deficiency, and random violence, stories are morally and aesthetically acceptable. In stories, meaning can be controlled…So why should not games also be a type of story? (2004, p.45)

However, when games are looked at in depth from a sympathetic perspective, their dramatic potential can be brought to the forefront without needing to sacrifice that which sets them apart from other media. When Krzywinska and Atkins defend the approach to game-texts with more traditional narrative models they embrace the medium's unique status:

> It is certainly the case that games have a functional dimension that is not present in other media types. However, functionality also operates 'textually'; the parameters of what a player can and can't do in a game are scripted into a game- even if we play creatively. (2008, p.6)

Ludic frameworks acting as springboards for flights of fantasy predate modern videogames by a long stretch, from informal childrens' games of make-believe through to sweeping tabletop role-playing systems with rules covering diverse eventualities, Steve Jackson's *General Universal Role-Playing System* (Steve Jackson Games, 1996) (Henceforth, 'GURPS') being a good example. In these kinds of games, the ludic framework generally requires basic representations of characters or items on its terms, so a sword may be represented as attack dice, or a player's character by a model on a hexagonal grid. However, most of the representational work of these games occurs in the player's imagination, and the business of playing tends to take place on an imaginative and discursive level separate to that of the tools used to simulate character interaction, becoming a form of moderated group fantasy. Any one participant's agency is limited to the scope of the framework, for the good of, and

indeed constitutive of the shared experience. The complexity of the framework increases as the 'possibility space'[2] grows and the minutiae of potential actions demand ever more rules and consequences. In addition to its 'core' rules GURPS is divided up by the designers into literary and filmic genre based 'supplements', each of which details the complexities of a range of actions and possibilities best-suited to its particular sphere, and how they should best be simulated. These supplements are so wide ranging and broaden scope to such an extent that every few years the entire edifice needs to be rebuilt from the core rule-set[3]. Devotees of this kind of gaming strive to generate as strong a potential visual representation as possible, moving from increasingly complex tabletop role-playing driven by a storytelling 'games-master' to live-action role-playing with elaborate scripted encounters involving multiple actors and referees. Continuing to enforce the link between the ludic framework that governs players' potential actions, and their ability to fantasise while ratcheting up the 'reality' of the play experience seems to be the goal of this movement from pens, paper and fantasy fighting to swords, shields and simulated combat. The game which brought role-playing to the mainstream, *Dungeons and Dragons* (TSR, 1974)[4], summed itself up on the back of the famous 'red box' basic set as "this is a game that helps you imagine", and the designers who developed it chose the company name, 'products of your imagination', thereby really pushing the game as an aid to the imagination rather than some kind of restrictive framework.

This lack of enforced representation is lost, or changed, in environments put forward by digital games. Suddenly the scope for imaginative manoeuvre becomes limited in a visual sense in a traditional computer role-playing game such as *Secret of Mana* (Squaresoft, 1993) or *The Witcher* (CD-Projekt Red, 2007). This is still the case even though the qualities of visual representation through game graphics improve dramatically quickly. On the other hand, visual representations are no longer the weak link between the simulation and the storytelling. The 'games-master' and the basic representational elements have been absorbed into the text directly interacted with by the player. Digital games and computer

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[2] Term coined by game designer Warren Spector as referenced in Jenkins and Squire (2002, p.70)

[3] GURPS is a labour of love, and making all the previous work done by dozens of authors redundant is not a decision the designers take lightly. When the core set has become outdated compared to newer material which complicates the whole edifice by cross-referencing supplements as well as the original rules, the only possibility is a fundamental redesign.

[4] Quotes attributed to the *Dungeons and Dragons* box throughout are taken from the back of a *Dungeons and Dragons Basic Set* 'red box', the reprint of the original 1974 set published in 1989.

role-playing games share many design features with their pen-and-paper counterparts: *World of Warcraft* (henceforth 'WoW') openly acknowledges its debt to *Dungeons and Dragons*[5] while even genres as diverse as football and racing simulations make a point or even a feature of admitting their characters are comprised of a simple combination of statistics. The representational element which cloaks the simulation is however where the two part ways. A Role-playing-game (henceforth 'RPG') participant playing a tabletop game has the luxury to imagine around the system whereas the digital gamer must do something else in order to negotiate their relationship with the text. This is what feels analogous to a suspension of disbelief, near to the same thing an audience do in traditional one-way media. The tabletop gamer, too, is suspending their disbelief, just from a less restrictive baseline, as the *Dungeons and Dragons* box also asserts: "The *Dungeons and Dragons* game is a way for us to imagine together – sort of like reading the same book, or dreaming the same dream." Although complications to this way of reading abound on the ludic frontier, straight dismissals of the narrative aspects of these representational elements such as Markku Eskelinen's rhetorically charged opinion show their intrinsic contradiction when games are observed in this context:

> Stories are just uninteresting ornaments or gift-wrapping to games, and laying any emphasis on studying these kinds of marketing tools is just a waste of time and energy. (2001)

Primarily difficulties stem from players' agency, the ability to affect the goings-on on-screen through the input device and the user interface. Since generally refusing to use agency is tantamount to not reading the text at all, this fundamental interactivity of gaming makes the gamer something other than an audience. Players also have varying degrees of agency and control over textual features themselves like camera angles or difficulty levels, and to some extent this is similar to the ability to imagine around a text while still operating within the boundaries of the simulation. Narratives and stories also cause issues with the process since it *feels* so close to the more familiar form of suspension of disbelief which we so commonly activate (or go through, or enable, depending on how one perceives engagement

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[5] The influence of *D&D* is shot through WoW's stat system, world design and quests, but was most clearly spelt out in a dedication by the lead designers upon the occasion of the death of Gary Gygax, an influential *D&D* designer : "His work on *D&D* was an inspiration to us in many ways and helped spark our passion for creating games of our own." (WoW Patch Notes, version 2.4.0 , 25/3/2008)

with texts) in the context of other media which primarily attempt to tell stories. Frustration with narrato-ludic dissonance, the way stories and ludic structures can grate against one another, such as when cut-scene movies strip away agency from charged ludic moments, was certainly one of the reasons I embarked on this research project, but it has not turned out to be the dragon I imagined it to be, nor to need slaying as such. Instead, dissonance can be seen in context as another symptom of the way gamers suspend their disbelief being unique. This thesis's main innovation is to locate and examine the differences which characterise this dissonance, alongside looking at the complexities of analysing what it really means to suspend one's disbelief.

Whether a player interfaces with a simple casual puzzle game, a mainstream console game or a complex virtual world, the act of engagement itself retains core similarities. Gamers make sacrifices as the cost of entering these representative, authored play-spaces, and expect these worlds to be presented to them in a manner that is in many ways analogous to *mise-en-scene*[6], aiding in the construction of both a 'fair game' and a fantasy. This applies whether the experience is as simple as dinosaurs popping bubbles in *Bust-a-Move 2* (Taito, 1995) or as complex as the multiple narrative possibilities offered in sci-fi thriller first-person-shooter (henceforth FPS) *Deus Ex* (Ion Storm, 2000). It has been argued that the primary enjoyment of games comes out of their learning trajectories, Chris Crawford's claim in early videogame studies remains difficult to dispute:

> Many factors play a role in motivating a person to play a game. The original (and almost instinctive) motivation is to learn, but other motivations come to bear as well. (1982, p.18)

Increasingly, the learning or meaning offered by a ludic space is a result of its cohesion with other motivations, increasingly including narrative elements. This cohesion is smoothed by an evolved conception of what Coleridge originally defined as the 'end' of suspension of disbelief: 'poetic faith' (as discussed in detail in chapter two), but in fact has its roots in behaviours as old as gaming itself. Observing ludic systems in a vacuum away from their human players and designers is more problematic than even literary formalism, since the

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[6] Literally translated as 'putting into scene' or 'placing on stage', the concept of *mise-en-scene* is used to describe the design aspects of theatre and film productions.

bounded interplay of rules is unique to each game and designed 'by hand'. To extend the comparison, it is as if a new language or grammar were constructed for every literary text, the motivations and thinking behind the construction of the space would merit almost as much criticism as the resulting text itself. Bogost makes this explicit when he discusses *Sim City* (Maxis, 1989), an otherwise innocuous city-building 'simulation' game. Since rules can be seen to generate bias and meaning, it becomes an oversimplification to observe any 'suspension of disbelief' enabled together through contexts and narrative features as nothing more than a veil cast over the ugly mathematical mechanics undertaken by the machine to makeup gameplay. Equally, claiming that a gamer simply inhabits or comes to inhabit a 'flow state' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) relative to the ludic challenge of the encounter, open to the consequent generation of pleasure devalues the uniquely interactive and interpretative qualities of gameplay.[7] Instead, the gamer appreciates the boundaries and grammar of the world which they inhabit within the game as distinct from reality. After four years of comparing suspension of disbelief with flow states, I still believe that Csikszentmihalyi is defining something which may align well with the end or effect of suspending ones disbelief as a gamer, but yet remains different. This sense of separation, alongside growing knowledge of agency, the player's ability to shape or impact the world, asserts itself against texts which often attempt to imply the best way for players to make the most of them is to let the worlds they present overwhelm and engulf, and remains consistent with one of Roger Caillois' core definitions of play, specifically that it is "accompanied by a special awareness of a second reality or of a free unreality against real life." (Caillois 1958, p.9) Suspension of disbelief seems to me a different pillar of the gamer's relationship with the game world, worthy of investigation in its own right.

Suspension of disbelief is a fundamental precondition to engagement with games. This research has borne this out. At the same time, narrative elements that might be taken for granted in other mediums are wrung through gameplay and games' ludic grammars before their meaning can be settled. Like everything else connected to games and the act of play, the suspension of disbelief as relative to this medium is fundamentally active[8], remodulating and evolving over the course of play. This is not to remove the act of interpretative textual

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[7] See Brown (2007) for further examination of flow states in the context of gameplay.
[8] In the sense that both Alexander Galloway (2006) and Norman Holland (2009) use the term.

consumption from its roots in drama and performance, but rather to observe how textual features generate nuances and differences in the process of engagement.

This observation of the gamer's own specific form of a suspension of disbelief being distinct from what has been called 'immersion' (examined in more detail in chapter 3), is another position defended in this thesis. An element of the rehabilitation of the term, suspension of disbelief in its proper context can make explicit elements of what Salen and Zimmermann have defined as the 'immersive fallacy' (2004 p.450) and, more importantly, show some of the explicit ways in which an awareness of the problems with the concept of immersion can be leveraged to make better games, that is by providing a more defined reader for designers to consider. Determining how gamers negotiate their relationship between their physical location outside of the text into the boundaried, immersive space of what has been defined as the 'magic circle' (Huizinga 1955,p.32) can close in focus on some unexpected contexts. These factors affect and mould a player's relationship to the text, but the orchestration of textual strategies including game 'feel'[9] itself also has an impact on the suspension of disbelief. Throughout this thesis carefully selected games and game features are analysed to examine how an evolved notion of the gamer's suspension of disbelief is created through rules design, agency and the delivery of narrative. The results of these textual and situational analyses are also contextualised in light of more general debates on the complex and contested relationships between text, immersion and interpretation. The conclusions reached through this approach deepen the specificity of the analyses of key elements of suspension of disbelief which are unique to games.

The overall goal of this research is to isolate, examine and interrogate the steps gamers make to engage with games on the same level as other accepted literary/artistic works such as literature, theatre or film. Definitions of literature and art are also in play in this endeavour. The work reflects upon the idea that game fictions and the way that gamers imagine these fictions are not such blunt instruments that the resulting imaginative link between player and text must remain entirely as Juul (2005 p.163) put it above, "uncontrollable and unpredictable". Focus rests mainly on the player and that which is presented to the player as part of the played experience. If books are read and films are watched, then the fictional worlds of games are lived experientially through interactivity,

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[9] This is referring to the term as remoulded by Steve Swink (2009)

and it is analysis of this moment-by-moment reading process that is the specific topic of this study. Contexts and rules cohere to produce that which is engaged with, and these coherencies will be deconstructed to aid in an analysis of the act of engagement. This allows for further understanding of how games build on previous narrative forms, and how their key differences rearticulate the way in which gamers come to take meaning from games. This is an attempt to further evolve games studies away from the dichotomies and paralyzing arguments of its difficult beginnings, and to do critical justice to a newly emerging facet of these ever more fascinating texts. As this thesis has taken shape it has been heartening to see the narratology/ludology debate fade away, and this work now feels as if it has a home in a less polarised view of games and game criticism's relationship with other critical traditions such as literary theory. By extension, the ways in which it grows connective tissue between these discourses seem more likely to be welcomed in the new, more nuanced environment of current games studies.

The reasons for undertaking this research began with the appreciation that players' agency, uniquely in comparison to the agency offered other media audiences, creates opportunity for leeway and manoeuvre in aspects of representation which until now have been rigid or subject to much slower-term forms of reader-response creativity. In turn the importance of this process is greater in games than in some other texts, the player's role as central agent or performer requiring a specific act closer to classical dramatic engagement than the passive act of watching a film. This method of approaching a text in which the receiver also holds control and responsibility for continuation of the experience locates gaming away from traditional notions of suspension of disbelief, where the burden of belief lies entirely with the reader. Gamers are, in many ways, already playing a role simply by accepting their position as players, bound by the rules of the text. It also places modern games somewhere outside Huizinga's (1955,p.32) venerable 'magic circle' concept, where play occurs within "its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner". Another part of Huizinga's definition may take on another tone, however: "But with the end of play its effect is not lost; rather it continues to shed its radiance on the ordinary world outside."(ibid, p.33). Understanding how gamers suspend their disbelief contributes not only to the ongoing debate regarding 'ergodic' textuality's narrative

potential, but also evolves accepted conceptions of more general theories of aesthetic response/experience.

Examining the act of textual engagement involves observing the entire process of the gaming experience from player to input device through mediation to representation and agency. This is necessary in part to isolate where elements affecting the suspension of disbelief are present in this representational chain. It is also worthwhile to analyse the texts from a gamer's perspective while at the same time remaining conscious of the underlying design that is partly responsible for the experience. A methodical ribbon that runs through this research is close textual analysis. The strengths of textual analysis include here the appreciation of the played experience, which is central to this research angle, in addition to the ability to pick out key narrative and ludic features operating *in medias res* of a game reading. Beginning with the underlying rules structures of games for dissection, or approaching games as primarily simulative or mathematical constructions has value when considering exactly how these systems do their job, but when attempting to isolate how they stimulate the imagination, enabling or obstructing the suspension of disbelief, the position of the player must remain paramount. Maintaining this angle also allows the affective qualities to be investigated, as will be demonstrated in a succession of close analyses of specific scenes in the Metal Gear (Konami, 1987-Present) series of videogames (in chapter five), qualities which have a direct link to suspension of disbelief thus framing some features that exist in less obvious forms in many other game-texts.

A working definition of suspension of disbelief in games, as has emerged from this thesis is valuable in and of itself. The term needed bringing back into line, in order to go from blunt rhetorical instrument back to its roots as an elegant yet very specific description of complicated reading processes, and doing this forms part of this thesis' main innovative contribution. The conclusions of this thesis with regards to the term itself are interesting, yet also help to mark out how the concept of suspension of disbelief in its current, evolved state may share more with games than methods of interfacing with more entrenched narrative media such as literature and film. Shedding light back on Coleridge's aesthetic concept builds upon the work of Anthony J. Ferri and Norman N. Holland, two scholars who have written on suspension of disbelief but never in the light of digital games, and whose

conclusions and methodologies are grappled with at length throughout this thesis. Examining the act of engagement in gaming through the lens of Coleridge's concept, which has been examined, reshaped and made use of to criticise these other media already, will explain more about the position of the gamer relative to narrative or meaning communication, and the actual alterations uniquely ludic features can capably effect. By isolating what is different about suspension of disbelief in games compared with other media, games will be both understood as distinctly different from that which has gone before and as worthy of the same imaginary leap of 'poetic faith'. Suspension of disbelief itself can be reclaimed as a concept that can be applied to help understand games better, and perhaps even improve the games of the future.

Chapter 1 – Making the Case for the Medium

Videogames have the same potential for storytelling as any of the more fundamentally narrative media that have preceded them. This is a good moment to indicate a definition of 'narrative', which, unlike 'text' has not been opened up to as many meanings by postmodern discourse. The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines narrative as "a spoken or written account of connected events. A story." It is explicitly distanced from dialogue in literary form. This definition is outmoded when held up to games and ludic environments, but some elements of it remain useful. As mentioned in the introduction, Eskelinen (2001) prefers to rail against the definition, calling game stories 'gift-wrapping', and claiming that in light of the various unique features that set games as a media apart from others, the definition cannot stand. I would suggest he is correct to insist upon the distinguishing of form from content, or storyline, but also argue that elements of both are equally necessary if we are to discuss games as texts most effectively. The wrapping paper, or even the box itself is, after all, sometimes a lot prettier and more interesting than whatever's inside, especially to those of a playful bent. Henry Jenkins also takes Eskelinen to task regarding the same quote, concluding:

> A discussion of the narrative potentials of games need not imply a privileging of storytelling over all the other possible things games can do, even if we might suggest that if game designers are going to tell stories, they should tell them well. In order to do that, game designers, who are most often schooled in computer science or graphic design, need to be retooled in the basic vocabulary of narrative theory. (2004, p.120)

However, he foresees a problem with accomplishing this goal, which this chapter, in part, seeks to set right:

> We must, therefore, be attentive to the particularity of games as a medium, specifically what distinguishes them from other narrative traditions. Yet, in order to do so requires precise comparisons - not the mapping of old models onto games but a testing of those models against existing games to determine what features they share with other media and how they differ. (ibid)

This chapter is concerned with comparing games' interactive processes to other media, keeping in mind these 'particularities'. This is approaching games on their own terms, something which Aarseth advocated when announcing the instigation of his 'ludologist' brand of games studies, marked by an insistence on games' difference from other media: "The adventure game is an artistic genre of its own, a unique aesthetic field of possibilities which must be judged on its own terms." (1997 p.107) Games certainly tell their stories in different ways, and research has focused on these differences (Murray 1998, Ryan 2003, Carr 2006). The suspension of disbelief, as shall be shown in the next chapter, is and was always conceived by Coleridge as an ephemeral attribute common to all manner of media types ranging widely from books and films to dance and ritual. To narrow down the comparison somewhat, I will attempt to justify the value of games as storytelling vehicles before analyzing the suspension of disbelief in light of this, and return to its wider ramifications in the next chapter. Storytelling mediums include but are not of course limited to the Arts and Culture package of literature, film and drama, yet this is where my focus will be applied. Murray (1998 ch.2) attempts this same analysis, but approaches games from the opposite end of the spectrum, justifying interactive narrative (and demonstrating her broader focus) against the three other principal media. Jenkins' nuanced take on the problem is a good balance between Aarseth's insistence upon difference of the medium of games and Murray's avowal that narrative and story do indeed persist in this medium. While Murray argues for games as an evolution of these modes, it is my intention to evaluate the similarities as much as the differences between the modes of engagement relative to different media, their specific incarnations of the suspension of disbelief. Suspension of disbelief itself is a persistent factor which continues to exist within the new storytelling paradigm that we must say games create if we are to remain in agreement with both Murray and Aarseth. Over this chapter games and their storytelling are looked at in comparison with the fictional products of other media; this involves distinguishing how games differ from or utilise these other formats. It is important to analyse each in isolation because they already form distinct media types which engender the suspension of disbelief alone, and have individual relevancies to videogames. It is my aim to show that gamers do not suspend their disbelief in the same manner as readers, viewers or theatre audiences, but that elements of these modes of interaction are present in games. This should shed more light on why these fundamentally different texts fall into the arena of forms which

require and take into account the suspension of disbelief as a key element of their conscious and unconscious construction and reception.

Games absorb, emulate or mimic other mediums as well as holding their own unique interpretative challenges, which mark them out as a distinct media type. Other media forms active inside of games take up different positions within the various genres and spaces available to the player. Books, films, music and even other games make up part of many games and can have ludic connotations, as well as forming elements of the experience as a whole. This ability to incorporate multiple modes is in and of itself part of a temporal dimension unique to the form and important to the mode of engagement. I call this dimension 'temporal' because reading a book while watching a film is inconsistent with the space/time restrictions of the latter medium, but no such restriction exists in games, so it is possible to read up on the history of the land of Ferelden while playing *Dragon Age: Origins* (Bioware, 2009), or even play through a choose-your-own adventure book as part of a playthrough of *Skyrim*! As such, the comparison with other media needs to take place both inside and outside the boundaries of the text. Modern game construction, much like modern game play, revolves around the cohesion of these various in-game elements alongside the quality of 'gameplay' which itself can be observed as a function of more than simply ludic features.   Storytelling in games is a combination of several other media alongside all the different elements that make games unique, however it is this wholeness of gameplay, the notion of a gameplay *gestalt* or macro gameplay/narrative gestalt that resists the pigeonholing of games as simply a hybrid media form. Thus this set of comparisons with books, films and theatre will be followed by establishing which unique elements of games are crucial to their storytelling potential. The way that we interpret games is grounded in the old modes that preceded them, yet games remain manifestly different and new, revealing facets of those textual types that their normal mode of engagement would overshadow. Written text in games has diegetic and non-diegetic possibilities, film in games can twist gamers' feelings of immersion or empathy and the dramatic in games can thrust the gamer into a suddenly performative space when it becomes self-aware or involving of them in extra-diegetic ways. The game's audience can find themselves faced with textual entities where sometimes text puts a check on the

imagination, film distances players from characters and narrative moments shatter the perceived screen, all held together and kept in flow by gameplay.

Beginning as niche hobby interests or arcade distractions, games have penetrated into the home and percolated back out to the masses again via the internet, now taking up a position as a commercial entertainment pillar. Multimedia conglomerates produce music, books, movies and games all under the same umbrella. This study, and this research overall, is mainly concerned with modern videogames, which is to say this incarnation of games as consciously part of an entertainment complex, commercially levelled against the cinematic, literary and music industries as competition for consumers' entertainment budgets. There is no rigid timeframe one can attach to these games which accept storytelling or entertainment as a factor in their commercial *raison d'etre*. They range from commercial abstract games designed to addict or amuse through to 'serious games' such as *Darfur is Dying* (MTVu, 2006), which has as much of a political agenda as other fiction texts based on real world events, such as the filmed documentary on Darfur it links to or Marquez's book *News of a Kidnapping* (1994), about the climate of fear in Columbia. The Metal Gear Solid series of games has been chosen as a case study further on in this work principally because it is designedly conscious of not only the suspension of disbelief's role in the gaming experience but also the changing way in which games are able to tell stories. It spans the entire development of the modern videogaming form and takes leaps of faith into new territory several times over, with varying degrees of success. It experiments with ways of telling stories through the medium, pushing at the boundaries while augmenting and changing its own gameplay and form to compensate for some of its wilder experiments.

It may seem counter-intuitive to approach the different medias head-on, without first defining and deconstructing the notion of a suspension of disbelief. The reason why this deconstruction is the next chapter's focus is so that our first look at the various different media that surround games can make the case for games as a medium which supports similar modes of engagement at all. If, for now, we take 'willing suspension of disbelief' to mean the audience's willing emotional engagement with the text, then we can observe this in relation to other media before delving into the specifics of games and liaising more closely with the subtleties of 'poetic faith' and 'shadows of the imagination'. This thesis is concerned with applying the specifics of a suspension of disbelief onto games and discussing

how they function, rather than directly defending games as a media somehow worthy of study. Kücklich (2003 p.102) made an impassioned case for the applicability of literary theory to games, but undermined his own argument by stating bluntly that "Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief" is of equal importance in game-fictions as in literary texts or other forms of fiction." This chapter is the beginning of an attempt to add substance to this position using the kind of analysis Jenkins (2004) pointed towards in the quote cited at the beginning of this chapter, investigating whether or not games require a hybrid mode of engagement made up of those required to engage with other media, or something unique and specific to their own form and construction. This should not only help make more connections between games and literary theory, as was Kücklich's goal, but also engage with games and other media forms together on games' own terms, as suggested by Jenkins. This is directly of interest to the research goal of this thesis because a full comparison will locate what exactly it is about ludic environments' mode of engagement, and by extension their form of a suspension of disbelief, that distinguishes them from other media. Doing so will galvanize both games' claim to this distinction and the importance of approaching from the angle of a suspension of disbelief. It is important to note that in this chapter for the purposes of comparison the media types which will be set opposite games are flattened out and only their most popular or prevalent instances are engaged with. Specific kinds of film, with an emphasis on Hollywood, of literature with an emphasis on the novel and of theatre with an emphasis on mainstream classical drama have been selected to represent these media. Audiences, too, are flattened out into an assumed receiver. This is not and attempt to force through any specific comparison, but rather to attempt to maintain the focus on the mode of engagement, and the workings of suspension of disbelief in games, which is the real aim of this thesis.

Modes of Engagement: Games and Literature

The first fictional media for comparison is literary novels and poetry. Usually authored by a single person and published 'static' in part or in whole, novels and poetry tell stories and evoke feelings and make meaning through language, narration, description and dialogue. Readers are required to fill in the void between signifiers and signified, exacerbated by devices, style and wordplay, with their own emotional responses and imagination. This allowing oneself to believe in the text and be inspired to imaginative activity through it is a

basic definition of Coleridge's notion of 'poetic faith'. It is debatable whether the act of reader engagement shares similarities with the act of player engagement. Both involve concentration, a decoding of complicated and sometimes implicit semiotics and the use of imagination. The act of reading itself is problematised by games, as is discussed in the next chapter, but particularly in the case of games with more explicit stories there is a definite feeling of cohesion between the two media. As far as the mode of engagement is concerned, on the surface games and literature share little in common. This surface difference, true to some extent when games are compared to theatre, literature or film, may contribute to why they are sometimes regarded as awkward or unworthy vehicles for narrative. When focus moves from the way the texts are interacted with to how the interaction itself works, however, some similarities are revealed.

Games and game stories share many features with their literary counterparts. Games have inspired fiction, with many of the major long-term franchises spawning series of novels based in their world, and fiction has inspired games. *The Witcher* went to great lengths to faithfully recreate the world of Andrzej Sapkowski's novels, and the online version of *Lord of The Rings* drew heavily from the minutiae of Tolkien's trilogy as well as being influenced by the novels and the movie incarnation (Krzywinska et al, 2011). Although novels now spin off from many videogames including the World of Warcraft, Halo (Bungie, 2001) and Assassin's Creed (Ubisoft, 2008) franchises, it is now relatively uncommon for a videogame to come packaged with a novel, as did S*id Meier's Alpha Centauri* (Firaxis, 1999) and, more recently the special edition of *Alan Wake* (Remedy, 2010). On the other hand, it is becoming more ordinary to see professional novelists working as part of games design teams, as was the case in the production of *Lost Odyssey* (Mistwalker, 2007) . Games' explicit narrative structures are only one segment of the entire object of study, but this segment conforms to many of the tropes common to mainstream fiction. Within a game's 'explicit' storyline, tonal concerns and a sense of authorship in the detail of the game's writing are as crucial to the totality of the experience as is the case in fiction. The notion of a specific style and forms of phrasing or word use as well as an overarching tone which becomes more familiar as the text goes on is also relevant, and synchronises well with a similar facet of gameplay. In gameplay the exact qualities necessary for success or ease of operation within ludic environments vary subtly, and less than subtly, in each individual title within even the most
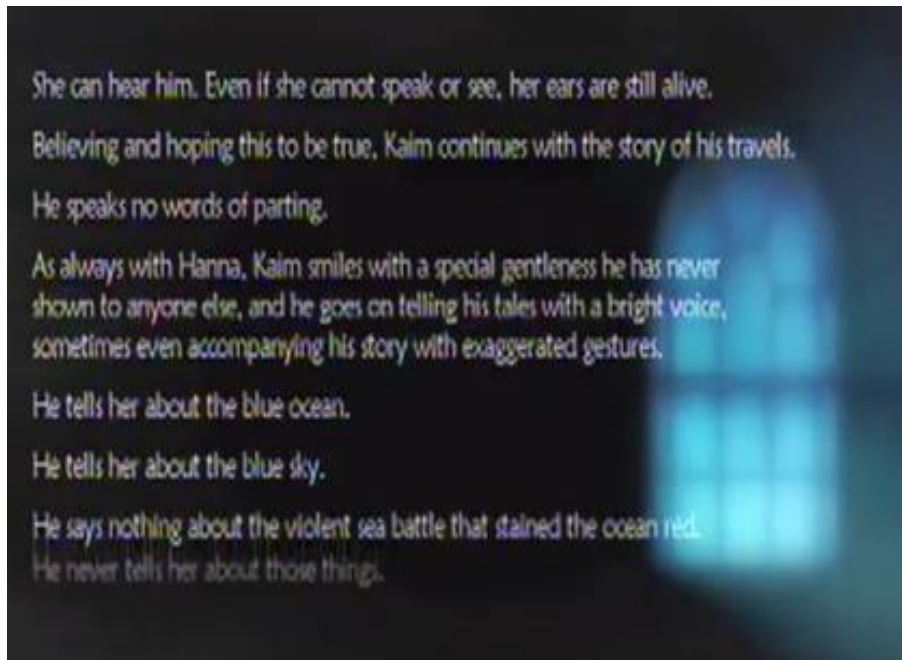
homogenous of genres. Through a longer period of play, the challenge inherent in the novelty of the control system or angle the game takes on its genre will fade, as the gamer gets to grips with another, different, usage of game grammar. This is the player's coming to terms with the individual 'gameplay gestalt' highlighted by Lindley (2002), and the catalyst for gaming's incarnation of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) 'flow states'. It is easier to inhabit a world where the controls are second nature just as it is easier to slip into the newest book from a favourite author or genre. Both modes favour the development of a relationship with individual style or expectations, and during gameplay one aspect can complement the other, creating the kind of virtuous circle which I have defined elsewhere as 'authored gestalt interplay' (Brown 2007), a kind of gamer's literacy.

In addition, this relationship building facet of the text can point to why games and literature are able to be picked up and put down without too much of an interpretative penalty. Unlike film, the forms are enduring enough to maintain themselves over a long series of play-sessions or readings. The length of a game is a troublesome concept to judge partly because of temporal concerns inherent within the form highlighted by theorists (Aarseth 1997, Arsenault and Perron 2009, Atkins 2007), and also hampered by the possibility of replayability. Another Marquez novel, the magical realist *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) can be said to have 'replay value' in the same sense as the explicitly narrative aspect of a ludic text like *Deus Ex*, which utilizes a 'triangular' narrative structure whereby one can repeat the process of engagement from beginning to end with manifestly different results. The difference is that there is no similarity to Caillois' (1958) *paidea*[10] play type; novels do not have explicit replay value for the sheer joy of inhabiting and experimenting within their world. Something of this can be observed if we take poetry as the more designedly 'free play' end of the literary spectrum. Poems can be read simply for the way they sound, and simultaneously communicate subtle meanings or even grand arguments through the intricacies of verse. While the poetic angle may be somewhat tenuous, the act of 'decoding' a game, especially in Stuart Hall's (1980) sense of the term, through ludic or paideic play resolutely mirrors the gradual familiarity born of reading fiction. It would be trite to describe this as the suspension of disbelief becoming easier through repetition, but to some extent

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[10] *Paidea* and *Ludus* are terms referencing Calliois' (1958) concept of the spectrum of game play forms running from unstructured playful *Paidea* through to rigidly structured *Ludus.*

this focus on dipping in and out of ludic literature or playful poetry, mirrored in the repetition or re-application of recognized patterns functions as a common factor in the mode of interpretation of both media. This can be seen to underscore the psychological economics of familiarity at work, reminding us of the mental goings-on which enable any kind of a suspension of disbelief.
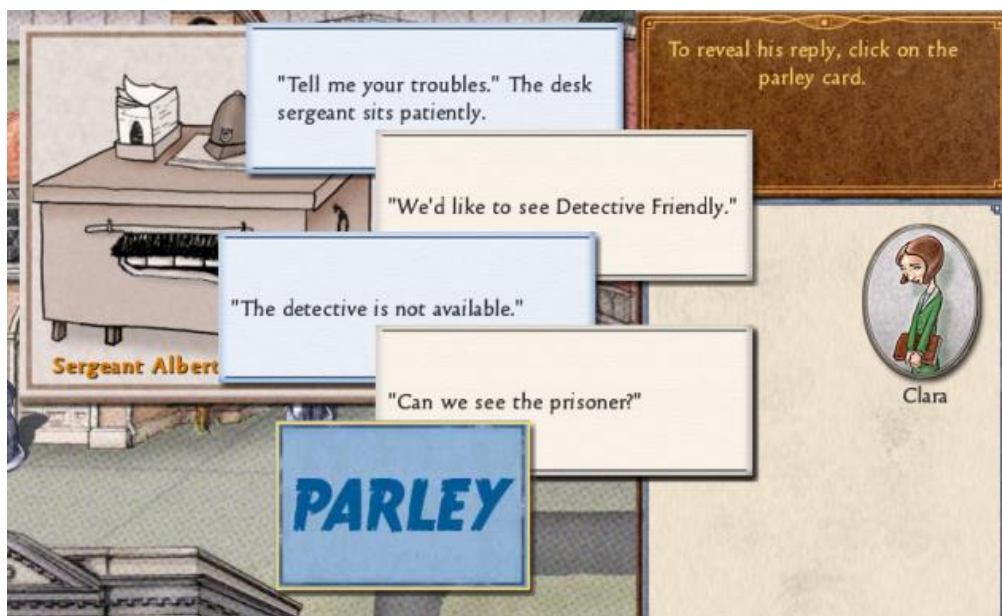
Fig. 01: Narrative transmitted through text: Long blocks in a dream sequence during Lost Odyssey (top) and short bursts of conversation in Dangerous High School Girls in Trouble (bottom)

The main points of divergence between the method of interaction with games and the method of interaction with novels and poetry are complexity, linearity and the restrictions imposed on ruled environments. Reading a lot of written text[11] is a feature common to many games, mainly of the role-playing-game (henceforth RPG) genre, but this does not necessarily mean the mode of engagement with games promotes the same type of suspension of disbelief in play when engaging novels or poetry, even in instances where the sheer amount of text involved bears comparison. Many games tell engaging stories which encourage empathy with characters using very few words whatsoever, such as *Shadow of The Colossus* (Team Ico, 2005), and 'flash fiction', as used in casual RPG *Dangerous High School Girls In Trouble* (Mousechief, 2008), makes every word count in a quick fire approach to the use of text in games. Even in *Lost Odyssey*, a modern game which regularly utilizes large blocks of written text to aid in telling its story, the divisions between narrative transmission and gameplay begin to resemble cut-scenes and the way games internalise film. *Lost Odyssey* contains 31 literary 'dream sequences', unlocked as backstory at key moments which display text popping onto the screen a sentence at a time, with key words animating as they appear. A gunshot will appear faster than the written text around it alongside a sound effect and change in background, for example. The scenes are accompanied by evocative music and graphics which enhance the experience without removing focus from the on-screen written text. To some extent this makes explicit the uneasy position written text takes up in the screen media context of games. Designers feel the need to embellish written text and make its meaning explicit, when the quality of the writing is more than sufficient to achieve this through normal textual interfacing alone. Thus it becomes apparent that it is rather the direct move from dialogic interaction with the game to passive reading of written text that the designers are attempting to smooth through the use of this device. However, *Lost Odyssey* trades off of this very difference between storytelling modes, giving the player the option to switch directly to the dream-sequence when the trigger for it occurs during the game's main plot, mimicking the movie convention more suited to 'flashbacks', or skip it for viewing later on. Gamers get the option to view these dreams not at any time they choose, but only during the lull in the traditional Japanese RPG format where characters stay at an inn to recover their statistics. Thus the

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[11] 'Written text' is being used in this section principally to differentiate between the reference to text on the page and the concept of the text as an entity or object of study, as used throughout the thesis.

differences between games and literature need not make the formats mutually exclusive. Dreams in *Lost Odyssey* augment the game's narrative while occurring at a point in gameplay rhythm where immersion can be observed as augmented rather than diluted by the less 'interactive' media being brought to bear. The key difference is that there is physically more going on in the act of gameplay than there is in the act of reading. Gamers need to be conscious of multiple controls, strategies and possibilities available at any given moment and capable of splitting focus into various different aspects of the experience. Deep and intriguing as a game's story might be, the minutiae of combat and controls that characterizes the bulk of many gaming experiences requires a different approach than the personally-paced imaginative flow of reading written text.

Most novels employ linear plots with characters that develop and are subject to events, undergoing change which makes up the action of the book, possibly informed by a grander authorial message or moral. They can also be more concerned with the creation of worlds, as is the case with Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. In contrast, most games contain a high degree of non-linearity both implicitly in their construction and explicitly in the way they are engaged with. Making choices, having the potential (be it real or illusory) to impact the world presented to the player is a fundamental part of the way games tell stories. Readers have no agency within the world in the same sense, aside from what they embellish with their own imagination. Thus, books are not approached with an expectation of agency, the reader's impact on the text is not built into the mode of engagement. Charles Dickens famously rewrote and tuned his monthly serialized novels in response to reader criticism so readers were able to impact those texts indirectly and somewhat chaotically through appeals to the author, but crucially these were not texts designed with choice in mind. Literature can contain still images and use all the tricks of the word processor to cue reader responses, but as a dialogic form it works ponderously if at all even in the internet age. The freedom offered up through literary interpretation resists the restrictions of ruled ludic spaces, wherein those specific pleasures can be found through the *paidea* side of the play spectrum. This grating dissonance between media is, once all the rhetoric is cut through, one of the root causes of much of the distrust behind the use of literary theory in the analysis of digital games, as cited in the introduction.

Alongside these similarities and differences, games internalise and make use of both books and the literary/written textual medium. Traditional representations of books are available for players' characters to read in *World of Warcraft*, *Oblivion*, and many other role-playing-games. They serve the purpose of contextualizing the world by deepening the environment since books once again provide familiarity, becoming more than just diegetic window-dressing, but also playing to the strength of this non-ludic form by putting fantastic 'lore' across in a form which allows much greater imaginative freedom. In the latter example they serve a ludic function as game objects if not so much as written texts, sometimes increasing a player's statistics when they choose to read relevant books, while in the latest incarnation of the former players earn an achievement for reading, or at least looking at, many books. The key difference here is that the action is what is privileged, opening the book gives the statistic rather than reading the written text. The opposite is true in *The Witcher* where arbitrary book-learning, which invites but in no way requires the player to actually read the text on the screen, is necessary as a prerequisite to many quests. Yet during this process, reading between the lines of the books presented in the game will provide hints to the environment which are conspicuously absent from their usual positions in similar genre games. Games in the RPG genre often include large amounts of written text in ancillary 'bestiary' or lore menus, and sometimes utilise it as a gameplay 'hook'[12]. The exhaustive bestiary for hundreds of items and monsters in *Final Fantasy XII* (Square-Enix, 2007) took on the character and tone of a quirky big game hunter's journal, and was unlocked as a reward for slaying the various beasts multiple times, as well as experimenting on them with different attacks and exposing their weaknesses. Certain numbers of repeated kills with different spells would each unlock a paragraph of information that could prove useful, although far from mandatory, when fighting similar monsters. The *Suikoden* RPG series (Konami, 1995-2006) featured something of the reverse of this as a way of distinguishing itself from other games of the same genre and adding coherency to the franchise. Each game contained 108 characters scattered around the world who could join the player's party and bring their skills to bear in the adventure, from taking part in combat to adding mini-games to the player's castle. There was even a recurring private-eye character, who

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[12] Howland (2002) defines gameplay hooks as any activity 'performed by the player for the purpose of furthering their playing' and distinguishes them from marketing hooks which are more to do with advertising the game's existence or appropriateness to a potential buyer.

unlocked a character bestiary that could be gradually expanded. The *Pokemon* (Nintendo, 1996-ongoing) series uses this kind of bestiary completion as its win condition, above and beyond its story mode. This trend for deepening a fictional world via written text is becoming apparent increasingly further afield, such as the fighting game *Super Smash Bros. Melee* (Nintendo, 2001) which contains a 'trophy mode' that makes use of large amounts of text separate to the action, unlocked through gameplay and deepening the game's bizarre, cross-franchise fiction, often by contextualizing niche characters in terms of their history as protagonists in other games. One of the innovations of *Grand Theft Auto 4* (Rockstar, 2009) was a large simulation of the internet accessible at web cafes within the virtual city, that satirised and ironised its real-life counterpart through written text. This optional deepening of fictional worlds shows games playing to the strength of the literary form, yet when story design and the plot of many games is examined, even in the case of sprawling RPGs, they tend to conform more to the TV series screenwriting model than the structure of the novel. This opportunity for deepening combined with the speed, action and character drive which constitute the tenets of 'Hollywood' writing creates an interesting landscape where gamers are able to take what they want from the more literary side of games without it necessarily impinging on their gameplay or the experience as a whole.

The adventure game *Myst* (Cyan Worlds, 1993) makes reading written text in-game as opposed to simply picking up books not only the core way to solve its many slow-paced, thoughtful puzzles, but also a key element of the storyline. In *Myst* players are faced with a space devoid of characters or action, simply an island they can wander around and a library they can explore. Gradually, the story is revealed and the gamer becomes more aware of their purpose when they read journals and books belonging to the island's inhabitants. Eventually they discover two brothers, trapped in books and begging for release. Each brother explains this release is enabled by completing further sections of the game, and maintains that the other is untrustworthy. The player's final challenge in *Myst* is to utilise the smaller stories they have engaged with to progress through the different worlds of the game and figure out the mystery, the macro-story which their protagonist forms a part of. The solution to *Myst* is to override the instructions of the characters with contextual information, and realise you are being manipulated. To win, the player needs to discover a third way, since helping either of the brothers results in the player switching places with

them and becoming trapped in the book themselves. Thus, engagement with what may appear ancillary narrative material has ludic connotations, in that the win condition is dependent upon exploration, and that exploration is cued through the game's internalised literary content.

Of course, *Myst* is the successor to a long line of primarily text-based adventure games, which Aarseth (1997) cites as 'ergodic' texts, and which blur the line between games and 'interactive fiction'. Text-only or text-heavy games which also require text input commands, like *A Mind Forever Voyaging* (Infocom, 1985)*, The Hobbit* (Beam Software, 1982), or *Starship Titanic* (The Digital Village, 1998) create a difficult dichotomy where textual description trumps visual representation. Games made of text create a clash of grammars, not allowing the same level or literary quality in the input parser as they do in the output description. The distinction between the grammars of reading and of gameplay can often become lost in this confusion. This is part of what motivated acclaimed interactive fiction designer Graham Nelson (1995 p.3) to describe the adventure game as "a crossword at war with a narrative". This issue with text parsers, adventure games and language resembles the issue of the 'uncanny valley' problem from the field of robotics (Mori, 1970) , often cited as a problem that now besets game graphics, where visuals look so close to the real that their flaws become more apparent than their verisimilitude. Assumptions of linearity and other qualities of literary fiction come about because in order to better suspend our disbelief in the textual side of the game, and imagine around it with the same freedom we have when reading a novel, we treat the game as though it were a book and are brought clattering back to earth by the inarticulate text parser and restrictions placed upon the suspension of disbelief through the ludic elements in the text. This is not to say that these games are redundant, or failures as interpretative entities, rather that they make explicit the complicated, mixed modality that interactivity brings to a textual space. These games bring to the fore the uneasy position of written text hinted at in the *Lost Odyssey* and *The Witcher* examples above. To some extent this input distinction is what separates *Myst* out from other adventure games, since it uses an entirely mouse driven graphical interface.

As shall become clear when other media are contrasted with games over the course of this chapter, the suspension of disbelief seems to emphasise different parts of the mode of engagement depending upon the media. The temporal dimension of the medium seems to

govern these differences to some extent. In the case of literature, suspension of disbelief appears more contractual, the product of unwritten rules which govern engagement. Since Coleridge coined the phrase in relation to literature and poetry, it seems most directly applicable and balanced in relation to this medium. The contract of what we do when we read a book is built into the construction and reception of literature and the nature of our interpellation into it. The temporal element, the way the impact of an imaginary world grows and snowballs as a novel goes on, reinforces that what's most important is the 'suspension' side of the phrase, emphasised over both the act of mental will or distancing required required and the degree of disbelief that needs to be suspended. The contractual nature of this suspension of disbelief is born out of the way in which we engage with the medium over time.

The gap between books and games is not so great when books move out of their mainstream comfort zone. Aarseth (1997) covers many literary texts with ludic pretensions from I-Ching through to early adventure games. Atkins describes how historical games can function similarly to counterfactual fiction, and books such as B.S Johnson's (1969) *The Unfortunates*, an unbound book-in-a-box, can be reconfigured. The difference, though, is generally so great that these game-texts or game-like texts become overwhelmed by the more complex medium, games masquerading as books. Splitting hairs over the definition can be avoided by simply observing how interaction with the text occurs. One does not primarily read *The Unfortunates*, or *Planetfall* (Infocom 1983), rather one plays these texts (even in the case of the I-Ching according to Aarseth, although this is a very different beast to the other examples), approaches them as games, and suspends disbelief in a different way. This is literature playing games. While it may be impossible to 'win' some of these texts it is just as impossible to 'read' them due to their chaotic construction. Like novels they are formed from text and have a consciously designed beginning, middle and end. However they are not designed for a linear reading experience, whereas even novels that play with language or established forms like the works of the *Oulipo*[13] movement, Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* (1947) or Marquez's *100 Years of Solitude*, which needs to be re-read with the foreknowledge of the ending, at least pay lip-service to a wholeness and sense of form.

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[13] The French literary movement experimenting with written text is well chronicled in Matthews and Brotchie (1998)

These game-texts, even 'choose your own adventure' style books, revel in their unformed qualities and the difference necessary in approaching them, where one needs to be aware of and make allowances for not only a use of game grammar unique to the author, but also formal rules that have been imposed upon the whole experience. The difference in approach necessary is the mechanical lens of gameplay. What Aarseth suggests as a label for the hypertext fiction *Afternoon*, a 'game of narration', he also applies directly to these novels-as-games (Aarseth 1997, pp.94). Assumed coherence is a major element of the suspension of disbelief in literature that is absent in ludic environments, hence why successful ludic environments utilise text and literature by invoking its familiarity, playing to its ability to engender freedom of imagination and implicit scope, allowing for a deepening of their fictional worlds.

Modes of Engagement: Games and Film

The second media to compare with games is film and entertainment-based television. Here the connection both in terms of the media and the mode of engagement seems more immediately obvious. While it may be difficult to picture a player as taking part in the business of reading, it is much easier to observe them as being involved, at least partially, in watching a screen. Games and films have much more high-profile crossover than games and literature. Spin-off movie-games are now a regular feature of the release of major films, and successful TV series can also expect to get the ludic treatment at some point in their lifespan. Fully realised attempts at interactive movies such as *The X-Files Game* (HyperBole Studios, 1998) marked something of an evolutionary cul-de-sac for the medium, although detractors of the close connection between games and films might cite the more recent Metal Gear Solid series games as reaching the same ends by the opposite means, beginning with the game rather than the Film or TV show, yet still resulting in a problematic hybrid. The cosy connection between the two media sees games aping cinematic modes, and game designers often turning to the movies for inspiration on how to evolve storytelling in their ludic spaces. However, there are fundamental differences between the media which make it clear that games are neither merely an evolution of films nor a mixed-mode take on the medium in the manner of graphic novels relative to literature. The mode of engagement, in fact, is distinctly alien to that of film, as highlighted when games attempt to internalise film through cut-scenes.

The most obvious similarity between the mode of engagement with films and videogames is that both are screen media. While games are mediated through a control system and film is passive, the action and meaning is still conveyed primarily via a screen. Even the passivity of film reception highlights an important distinction between the similarities of games, films and novels, in that the former two media can be engaged with for purposes other than the reception of the story. Just as games are frequently played primarily for their ludic elements rather than their attempts at storytelling, it is equally possible to watch a movie entirely for its special effects, or to see a favourite star in action. Hollywood has embraced this mode of mixed reception, and the suspension of disbelief has altered alongside it. There is a middle ground in the reception of mainstream commercial films, a no-man's-land where the active suppression of suspension of disbelief is paramount. Harrison Ford is Harrison Ford first, Indiana Jones second. The explosions in *Independence Day* (Emmerich, 1996) are worth trawling through the hackneyed plot and hammy dialogue for. This 'blockbuster narrative'[14] reading approach is something more than just critical distance, since movies often consciously market themselves or are designed from the ground up as star vehicles or special-effects extravaganzas. Movies trade off of their saleable features be they big names, big stories or big budgets, and scripts or formative texts are often compromised to cater to these concerns. Much of this is born of film's requiring only passive engagement in temporal and hermeneutic terms, a form of reading which temporally unfolds without any activity on the part of the viewer. There is certainly a language of the camera and a logic of the scene presented to unravel, but there are no pages to turn and no massive leaps of acceptance to make in terms of what's being represented. It is rare indeed, in modern film, to 'see the strings'. The approach to film construction favoured by Hollywood supports films' being engaged with in a passive manner, but this is not to deride the scope of this medium, or to say that it is any less literary or worthy than another. If anything the passivity is freeing, viewers are encouraged not necessarily to suspend their disbelief entirely and free their imaginations, but rather to take what they want, seek or desire from the experience presented[15].'Poetic faith' in the movies comes not from allowing for flights of fantasy as it does in literature, but rather from belief that the images offered hold something relevant

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[14] Well described and debated in King (2001)

[15] Clover's work on film (2004) implies that this is an enabling facet of film, allowing for audiences to experience emotions otherwise not permitted. Feeling fear where ideals of masculinity might otherwise stand in the way, for example.

enough to hold the attention of the viewer. This is not to say that other approaches to filmmaking cannot provide as engaging an immersive experience as Hollywood movies, but rather that they are not obliged to, and in many cases this may not even be the goal of the text in its final form. The same is true for games, but since games require active engagement the suspension of disbelief is compromised in other ways, which can be discovered if we look at how games and films collide.

Fig. 02 Heavy Rain *(Quantic Dream, 2010) gameplay footage (left), and* Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within *(Sakaguchi, 2001) movie shot (right). The output of special effects in movies and videogames are beginning to resemble one another.*

Increasingly, as the rush towards graphical 'realism' continues in games and CGI special effects are invested in and developed for movies, the output of the two media are beginning to visually resemble one another. Sound and music also serve similar purposes in both mediums too, although film lacks the additional diegetic concerns that interfaces and control systems provide. Filmic diegesis more generally, or at least the borders it creates, is also present in games. Game characters may be aware or unaware of extra-diegetic features from mundane music or mouse pointers through to complicated control systems or even the player's existence. Clicking on a character in *Warcraft III* too many times causes a range of humorous diegetic and extra-diegetic audio responses, playing with the veracity of the fictional world the game posits. A human priest might exclaim 'I have been chosen by the big metal hand in the sky!' while Orcs sometimes sing 'it's not easy being green!'[16]. Many is

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[16] Quotes taken from the quotes section of http://www.wowwiki.com/Quotes_of_Warcraft_III/

the game adventurer able to carry mountains of guns or gear without any perceivable change to their appearance. In addition to the fluidity of diegesis, constructed entirely around the premise of fundamentally non-diegetic entities to motivate and drive them, modern games look and sound like films, and combined with the other similarities this may be part of the reason why story structures in games also tend to resemble those of films. Three-act structures which rigidly conform to Joseph Campbell's (1949) 'hero's journey' model alongside archetypal characters and plots serve to keep game stories moving with momentum perhaps sometimes more suited to the structures of the films they mimic than the games they form a part of. Film and TV's focus on single characters or small groups of characters, on screen for the vast majority of the time, lends itself to comparison with notions of embodiment in games, at least on the surface. This surface similarity is most apparent in cut-scenes, where games internalise and alter films directly. The primary role of these visual exposition sequences in games aspires to the same generation of empathy as film. Other concerns may become paramount, such as advising the player in no uncertain terms as to what to do next, but nonetheless they will be couched in the same empathic framework.

While game narratives often appear from a surface perspective concerned with creating empathy for their characters, this does not seem to be directed in the same way as in film. Empathy's primary function is motivation of the player rather than storytelling. Players will engage with the game more and probe further into it if they find the characters appealing, without having this appeal jar against the game's ludic fundamentals. Game characters can also function as activators for game action or conduits to effective gameplay. Thus, while games aim to motivate or create active responses, film (at least Hollywood films that are set alongside games as mainstream entertainment) is limited only to inspiration or passive empathy/sympathy generation. This passivity feeds out into the mode of engagement, in that film viewers empathise with, yet do not actually believe that they are the hero, rather they feel that they could be her. This may seem to be even further muddied in games, but in fact the distinction is clear-cut. The player is already in the game, if not the diegesis, through the way the medium operates.

Fig.03 Grand Theft Auto *player-characters evolving from dislocated extension of the player in 1997 (left) through 2001's silent, unnamed protagonist (middle) to fully-fledged character Nico Bellic in 2009 (right).*

The position of the hero in games can vary wildly from a fully fledged narrative protagonist steeped in the storyline and controlled by the player such as Abe in *Oddworld: Abe's Oddysee* (Oddworld Inhabitants, 1997) through to a completely malleable character designed and inhabited by the player, as is the case in the Elder Scrolls games (Bethesda, 1994-ongoing). By contrast it is a central tenet of film that the hero or lead character drive the narrative. Many leading characters exist between these two poles, the narrative constructed but player driven *Fable* (Lionhead, 1996 – Ongoing) avatars on one side and the player constructed but entirely narrative driven Hawke of *Dragon Age 2* (Bioware, 2011) on the other. The main character of the *Grand Theft Auto* games (Rockstar, 1997-present) has evolved over the several iterations of the game from an unnamed extension of the player that provided an enjoyably cathartic experience in the original *Grand Theft Auto* into the deeper, more distanced *Grand Theft Auto* 4 protagonist Nico Bellic, who is built in the morality play or modern gangster movie mould. *Assassin's Creed* has a novel approach to this problem by framing its protagonist, Desmond as a dreamer, generating a hypodiegetic[17] frame for the main action of the game which explicitly occurs within his technologically-aided dreams. *Bioshock* (2k, 2007) stuns the gamer midway through the experience by

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[17] 'Hypodiegetic' is best defined alongside its opposite, 'heterodiegetic'. A heterodiegetic narrative is one which is told by a narrator who does not take part in the plot, a genuine third-party. By contrast, a tale-within-a-tale is hypodiegetic. These terms, coined by the narratologist Gérard Genette in his discussion of narrative levels (1972) are examined and eventually validated in the context of games with some caveats by Pinchbeck (2007).

revealing the reverse of this technique[18]. This distance between the gamer and the hero or played character can heavily inform the tone of a game's story, and dictate how many filmic tropes are relevant. Certain kinds of perspective shifts common to film can have heavy consequences in media where the audience is focused on being rather than seeing. Since players are comfortable in the skin of Gordon Freeman, his face is never shown apart from on the game packaging. Thus dramatic chase shots and close-ups are impossible since the simple camera change would wrench immersion.

From a narrative construction perspective the fundamental differences stand out as games' ability to recombine or alter their stories in response to player decisions. *Star Ocean: The Second Story* (Enix, 1998) radically recasts its narrative in light of the choice of hero and the decisions made, a device that *Suikoden 3* (Konami, 2002) evolved into its 'trinity sight' system of chapters and levels that utilized multiple protagonists experiencing the same events from different vantage points in any order the player wished, cued much in the same way as *Rashomon* (Kurosawa, 1950). Not limited to RPGs, this difference manifests as the 'triangular narratives' of strategy titles and first person shooters. We can see it more closely when we look at characters. When a character controlled by a player is hurt, players not only observe the results of this but also quite often have to deal with the consequences; be they a loss of points, less opportunities to be hurt in the future, restrictions in agency or even having to start all over again. It is important to note that in this case the gamer is less 'hurt' than the film viewer, lacking the luxury of lingering concentration on the painful moment, but has to deal with the consequences rather than just take the emotive hit. The core distinction being not even so discrete as identification relative to empathy, but rather identification *with* textual figures, which occurs in games relative to identification *as* these same characters, which happens in films. Part of this division stems from the operation of ludic grammars and their assumed application throughout game worlds, a form of ludic acclimatisation. When a film character or hero is hurt, viewers may, or even should, consider what it would be like if they were in that same position, with those same motivations, feeling that same pain. The Resident Evil (Capcom, 1996-ongoing) series takes the visual, filmic trope of the wounded hero struggling on and gives it ludic ramifications by chaining it to the player character's health status. Often, players *must* feel and deal with

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[18] This sequence is discussed in detail during chapter 6.

characters' being wounded as it manifests through non-negotiable feedback, their aim and speed suffers and resources must be spent to return to better states. By extension, appreciating and dealing with these consequences as a requirement to progress with the 'reading' experience encourages the assumed application of the grammar onto other entities in the game-world. Even if the same specific consequences that follow Jill or Chris being wounded in *Resident Evil* (Capcom, 1996) do not apply to the zombies they are fighting, the repercussions of identification as protagonists Jill or Chris causes the belief that impacts made by them on the world carry the same clout. This differs from the mode of engagement with film since the connection with the impacts in games are only half-imagined.

Diegetic differences also underline the distance between the modes of film and game engagement. In film, the distinction between diegetic and non-diegetic stimuli is most easily framed through examples of the use of sound. Music which characters can hear is distinct from music intended only for the viewer, and bookended by devices designed into the experience. Games utilise this distinction (the same example being an RPG convention in its own right) but also introduce a host of diegetic, extra-diegetic and inter-diegetic features (Pinchbeck 2007, Calleja 2007). Each lens of player, game and game narrative can be observed as a separate diegetic environment, and crossover or transgression between these diegeses can aggravate a gamer's affordances and remould the suspension of disbelief effect. Characters may be simultaneously conscious and unconscious of game mechanics, game controls or the existence of the player. Much of this resolves itself as a mere question of semantics, primarily because its forays into the primary mediating devices are few and far between (as discussed in chapter five), but games have begun to take more creative approaches that embrace the necessary distinction of dimensions that are simultaneously 'in play.' These distinctions feed into the way games take up film devices and alter them. Camera control has become necessary in 3d games and can all too easily become a distracting frustration, thus control is often mediated between pre-programmed camera positioning and player-controlled tweaking, even given over entirely to players throughout some games. Shot designs and camera angles are aped in games when their rhetorical ends align and the impact on the ludic dimension is not too great, once again the suspenseful

shots in the early *Resident Evil* games serves as a very direct example, showcased by Krzywinska:

> *Resident Evil 3* imposes different camera angles onto the viewer's perspective, withholding visual information and creating a pronounced effect of enclosure. Like a film, *Resident Evil 3* structures space and the player's experience through editing and fixed framing, which is often used to create shock effects. (2002b p.209)

Games incorporate films and some of the devices used in film explicitly. Camera angles available in many racers, particularly the Gran Turismo series (Polyphony Digital, 1997-ongoing) resemble those from race or chase sequences in films, even to the point where some make the game unplayable when they are selected, existing only for use during replay modes. Many modern games explicitly package themselves as though they were films, both externally in terms of the marketing and box art for a game like *Gears of War* (Epic Games, 2006) and internally through adopting the traditional film form with credits bookending the experience. Although there is no reason to package or construct a game this way and it arguably fails to highlight the strengths of the medium, the desire to mimic the film industry spills out of modern videogames, especially at the 'AAA' end of the spectrum. This is also a factor in games' consciousness of themselves as potential films. Stepping further than the racing games' cinematic camera angles, the theatre mode in *Halo 3* (Bungee, 2007) automatically records past multiplayer sessions, allowing the player total freedom of cameral movement and the ability to watch the entire game as if it were a static movie.

By far the most direct and prevalent way games directly incorporate films is through the use of cut-scenes, which have grown into something of a form-within-a-form as they become the *de facto* way of communicating plot points and complex narrative moments to players. Classically a cut-scene removes control from the player and displays the action for them to watch. The goals in their use are generally narrative, or bridging the space between one particular kind of gameplay gestalt and another. Long cut-scenes function as rewards for negotiation of tricky levels in *Tomb Raider* (Eidos 1996) , and often work to establish the challenge of boss fights in by bookending the action with entrance scenes and death scenes focusing on the adversary. Mario's entering the castle at the end of a level in *Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo, 1985) while scores are tallied is a brief cut-scene lasting only a few seconds,

while *Metal Gear Solid 4* (Konami, 2008) contains cut-scenes over 45 minutes in duration. Often this takes the form of a far higher resolution sequence, making the distinction between game and film more apparent. In *Final Fantasy VII* (Squaresoft, 1997) the gamer needed to contend with three different levels of visual representation: the FMV cut-scenes where characters were uncontrollable but looked high-quality, the battle screens where they looked fairly detailed and were controllable via menus, and the general navigation screens where the characters were reduced to little more than 'superdeformed' representational playing pieces, but the player had fuller agency to move around anywhere they pleased. These sorts of cut-scenes cut out control completely, but control is also removed in-game in many titles. The *Grand Theft Auto 4* mission briefings are one example of otherwise fairly free agency being wrenched away at the beginning and end of missions to be interspersed with film. Some games such as *Half Life* (Valve, 1998) eschew the shift, and do not remove control entirely, instead locking the player in a given area while the exposition happens around them, generating a different impact, as noted by Atkins:

> Once the game-world of *Half-Life* is entered it offers an internal consistency. We might not be able to experience the same kind of subversive pleasures of reading available to the player of *Tomb Raider* , but we are given the possibility of engaging in a plural reading experience in exercising choices of observation, and of taking a readerly responsibility for the detail of textual progression. (2003, p.77)

Subtle controls are sometimes possible even when the player is frozen out of control during cut-scenes that take place in-game rather than through pre-rendered video. The perspective alters gently in tandem with player input during the introductory sequence of *Shadow of the Colossus*, while in *Metal Gear Solid 2*(Konami, 2001) players come closer to fully-fledged cameramen with the ability to zoom in and out, change viewing perspectives and even hear characters' thoughts during the long periods where action is not being controlled directly.

Fig.04 - three different viewing modes in *Final Fantasy VII* : The high quality FMV cut-scenes

Medium quality Battle-view

Low quality 'superdeformed' field view

A more short-term version of the interactive cut-scene known as the 'quick-time event' has recently become a popular way of maintaining gamer engagement during narrative exposition in mainstream console games. During a quick-time event periods of intense character action, such as the feats of strength Kratos performs in *God of War II* (Sony, 2007) or Leon's dodging blows from huge enemies in *Resident Evil 4* (Capcom, 2005) need to be accompanied by sudden but simple player input strings in order for the cut-scene to proceed. The reasoning behind the introduction of these devices is plain: the removal of passivity from cut-scenes while maintaining the visual payoff that complex exposition can allow. It is arguable that players shifting from strategically positioning and manoeuvring Kratos or Leon to tactically engaging with their endeavours during cut-scenes actually intensifies immersion. The symbiosis between player and character action is maintained or even galvanized, since characters remain helpless and vulnerable without player input, whereas inputs symbolically attain verisimilitude with the effort (hammering buttons to make Kratos move heavy things) or timing (pushing buttons at the right time for Leon to dodge) necessary for the actions that take place in the cut-scene. However, by wrenching players out of established gameplay grammars to play mini-games with terminally restricted agency as a film runs in the background seems to only devalue both the ludic value of shifting to a different grammar and the narrative value of removing direct control from the player. Their inclusion causes players to maintain a state of vigilance, their eyes, minds and fingers focused on what might suddenly be asked of them rather than shifting, even if only momentarily, into the beginnings of a different mode of engagement. The subtle bias this design feature really demonstrates is mainly in agreement with Aarseth and Juul; the fundamental assumption that all narrative represents distraction from the business of gaming, since too much immersion or focus on the scene, an overindulgence in another mode of engagement can lead to players being penalized or a swift Game Over. Quick-time events show in microcosm the debate around the value of the cut-scene since they maintain the ludic mode of engagement seemingly at whatever the cost to the potential storytelling value of the action. Far from having their cake and eating it by reconciling Juul's perception of ludic temporality into a single unbroken stream, they merely add a second 'game-time' into the mix, running in parallel with the 'real-time' film. This second game serves to accentuate narrative's role as a blurrer of boundaries between player and game, since the enclosing game-narrative or context being set in opposition to both the first game and the

film emphasizes its naked difference, its lack of established context to stand alone. The true temporal issue is thus revealed to be the *potential* temporality inherent in the player's retaining full control set against the enforced temporality of exposition sequences. When they represent the totality of the experience, in games as diverse as *Dragon's Lair* (Cinematronics, 1983) and *Heavy Rain* (Sony, 2010), the device is seen to work precisely because there is no 'default' level of game-time to contrast it against. Even if we are to evaluate quick-time events as nothing more than a good idea poorly executed, their efforts nonetheless expose the temporal dimension of agency as one of the core features unique to the suspension of disbelief in videogames. Having not only the freedom to dip in and out of the textual moment as in literature, but also the freedom to set the duration and depth of that textual moment sets gaming modes of engagement as far from film as film is from literature.

The modern games industry's fascination with Hollywood and the filmic mode attempts to draw the commercial perception of games closer to that of films. Yet as mainstream commercial games increasingly resemble mainstream commercial films and take up cinematic tropes of camera and perspective use, cinematically inspired plotting and storylines or even whole film scenes in cut-scenes, they simultaneously resist core elements of the cinematic mode of engagement. The inherently active nature of the gaming mode of engagement morphs the way that cinematic stories can be told through the medium, requiring a considerate camera that is subordinated to framing the actions of, or even controllable entirely by the audience. This handing over of the primary method of cinematic communication colours the entire contrast between film and games, since the player has a say in where the camera points and all the visual rhetoric that implies. Camera movements need to be 'nudged' out of players rather than explicitly shown to them, as the Valve level designers comment on the opening scene of *Half Life 2: Episode 1* (Valve, 2006)[19], and of which the context-sensitive 'look towards object of interest' Y-button control in *Gears of War* is an example. Cut scenes and filmic plots also face the difficulty of the audience as empowered individuals rather than a malleable mass, and major expositional sequences in the traditional form requiring transition from active playing to passive watching. What may at first appear a directly equivalent mode of engagement is shattered by the fundamentally

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[19] The game's developer commentary is split up into nodes. The node referenced here is #2.

distinct temporal dimensions that watching and playing engender. To some extent that which unites games with literature distances games from films. On the other hand diegetic concerns from the perspectives of design and reception in modern videogames are born first out of the cinematic viewer's relationship to the diegesis and deepened in the more active medium. While many valid equivalences remain on the surface of ludic and cinematic modes of engagement, when observed in more depth the two modes diverge quickly. This is made most apparent in the case of game-film tie ins (Brown and Krzywinska 2009) . As far as games studies are concerned this is the most widely compared medium (King and Krzywinska 2002, 2005) while literature is often cited by Games Studies scholars (Aarseth 1997, Kücklich 2003, 2006).

Modes of Engagement: Games and Theatre

The third media to contrast with games is much less often written about in Games Studies: theatre and drama. The mode of engagement in theatre shares, as I will demonstrate, several similarities with games, and the suspension of disbelief is much more openly in-play in the two media than in literature or film, where it is accepted as a contractual aspect of the form and implicit due to the passivity of the receiver respectively. Aristotlean theatre as a mode holds the distinction of involving the suspension of disbelief as part of the form, a continuum with potential to be manipulated or moulded over the course of the audience's experience. Modern theatre can often seem a lot more overtly gamelike than more formalised, older theatre. Fiona Templeton's works resemble alternate reality games and have the audience searching around different spaces in a city to encounter 'text'. The device which links theatre and games most closely is an evolution of the 'fourth wall'; the acceptance of the textual space by actors which blocks characters off from the audience. Simply defined as an invisible wall at the front of the stage which separates audience and action, this characteristic of the theatrical audience's mode of engagement has a wide-ranging impact on audience reception. Far from a simple manifestation of the suspension of disbelief, the conscious use of the fourth wall as a device by dramatists, actors and audiences adds a dialogic dimension to the mode of engagement with theatre which is absent in other 'one-way' media but commonplace in games. This holds great relevance to suspension of disbelief's unique qualities when it occurs in games, and is discussed at length in chapter five.

The structural similarities between theatre and games are striking, and under reported in Games Studies literature. Gonzalo Frasca's (2001) work on Boal's 'theatre of the oppressed' is a notable exception, and begins some interesting connections between theatre and game mechanics and deployment. Both put themselves forward as bounded experiences that take place in a zone separated from normality, where different rules apply. Huizinga's magic circle is not so different from a stage, as he observes by finding play and the language of play in similarly bounded spaces of law courts and parliaments (1955 p.32). Audience and actors are united by demonstrable reality and physical presence; both *are* people rather than descriptions or representations of people, but various spatial divisions split up and dissect their agency. The beginning, middle and ends of experiences in the theatre are heavily demarcated, as is the location of the fourth wall that separates those that are part of the text from those that accept the conventions of and make the allowances for receiving. In traditional forum theatre the proscenium curtain bisects the space as effectively as the screen does in gaming, but a gaming 'fourth wall' can also be represented via the constraints of a game board or sports pitch. The raising of the curtain and the beginning of the application of the new spatial order is a heavily signalled event in more formal theatre, as well as a convention in games, which highlight when the player moves from the role of controller or interactor in menus or settings to player in the game with intro screens, level loading screens or a simple "Press Start" instruction. The exit points of this space are also marked out, be it by the fall of a curtain, the raising of the lights or the display of a game-over or end screen. The curtain's fall or the bringing up of the lights, like in-game death or resetting, needn't mark the end of the experience, only the temporary suspension of the rules of the space. These 'Press Start' and 'Game Over' traditions of modern videogames have steadfastly survived through major shifts in the representational capabilities of the medium and audience's expectations from it not simply because they are heralds of the ludic mode, but rather because gamers also need to see the curtain rise or fall in no uncertain terms, to trigger their shift from role to role. Easing the transition into and out of the space is itself an 'interactive' property shared by these two textual types.

The textual machinery is unabashedly on display in theatre and games to an extent unheard of in literature or Hollywood film. The audience is expected to conjure a whole setting from an onstage hint, a wider scene outside of that displayed from a window or exit, or an

extreme situation like a battlefield from symbolic signifiers of a few soldiers. Gamers need to accept that even in a game as haptic as *Twilight Princess* (Nintendo, 2006), their flailing sword-arm is not actually making contact with anything. Auto-targeting stands in for a character's quick reactions, button pushing speed replaces aggression or endurance in beat-em-ups and menu interfaces become tactical thought processes in traditional Japanese RPGS. At all times the guts of the experience, literally the 'textual mechanics' are part of the space, absorbed into the fantasy to a greater or lesser extent in each different production. Actors or black-clad stagehands might change the scene, which could happen in all manner of ways from the invisible to the subtle to the explicit. Game interfaces may stand out as imposed signifiers of the ludic dimension within the diegetic world of the text, such as the large arrow that points the way in *Grand Theft Auto 3* (Rockstar, 2002), or the big green diamond that indicates who the player is directing in *The Sims* (Maxis, 2000). Alternatively game features can masquerade as part of the diegesis, the HEV suit doubling as a heads-up-display in *Half-Life* or the main character's trench coat standing in for an inventory system in *Alone in The Dark 5* (Eden Games, 2008). *Grand Theft Auto 3* replaced its arrow with a satnav system that performed the same function yet sat better with the diegesis in its sequel *Grand Theft Auto 4*. The coexistence of text and mechanics creates an atmosphere that requires more from the reader but gains malleability and the possibility of manipulation through this requirement that everyone involved buy into the constraints of the space, suspend their disbelief.

Compromise is essential to the mode of reception of both theatre and games. The entire space in which the textual transmission process occurs is one of compromised reality and mediated fantasy. Compromise comes about since the limitations of the space clash with the potential of the text, and as such the audience is forced to accept that the man on stage is not King Lear, or may even play several parts in the same production. In games, the compromise is a limiting of one's potential actions to the agency-granting controls indicated and sanctioned by the text. Nor are non-player videogame enemies truly cunning or intelligent, since they will always follow to some extent pre-defined behaviours and paths, which enough experience of games can expose. On the other hand videogame friends and non-player characters (Henceforth NPCs) described to us in detail in text-based adventure games or standing before us in their modern 3D counterparts inevitably lack the depth and

potential that an equivalence of perspective would imply. This is the cause of some of the potency of the effect noted by Murray when Floyd sacrifices himself in *Planetfall*, and is also evident when Alyx plays tricks on the player in *Half Life 2: Episode 1*[20]. Grating against the temporary world of the text, these realistic concerns must be compromised by a constant act of 'will'. This jars even further if juxtaposed alongside the idea of the Nietzschean 'will to power', which can be seen in some lights to motivate the adversarial and challenging 'unnecessary obstacles' of games, to recall Bernard Suits' definition "playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles". (1978 p.55)

This active facet of the suspension of disbelief is more prevalent here than in other media because of the personal involvement of the audience in the space. In theatre, the physical proximity of fantastic action to real audience enforces a receptive compromise which itself generates investment in the message. This is mirrored in games by the real player's being the primary motivator of fantastic action (albeit from a variety of different possible textual angles). The only way to be 'closer to the action' than a theatre audience is to be an involved participant, a player in the theatrical sense of the word. Since the 'play' can so easily be mentally dispelled by removing the act of faith which gets the audience past the textual machinery, the faith required goes beyond belief in the veracity of the action on or around the audience and into concentrating on the message and the way it is being communicated; how the space functions and is being used. Hamlet's "The play's the thing" takes on a new, dual meaning when placed between theatre and games which begins to shed some light on the linkage between these modes of engagement. Looking beyond the interface and into the relations of elements within this compromised reality can cause audiences to find something concrete to believe in. This could be related to the space itself, or to the text being conveyed through this space. There is no solidity to either the theatrical fourth wall or the textual position of the active player, unlike the barriers generated by screens and distances presented by written texts, which rely less on a direct compromise of reality with fantasy.

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[20] Alyx, the player's sidekick in this game, generally aids the player but can also be mischievous. Various trigger points can lead to giving reminders of both her presence and their relationship. One example comes in an underground level filled with zombies. The player's flashlight runs out of battery occasionally, and the level is designed to have players cowering in the dark waiting for the light to recharge. Alyx is programmed (only sometimes) to wait for the light to go out and then make zombie noises, startling the player into desperate action when at his most vulnerable, a diegetic practical joke that works both inside and outside the text.

The other aspect of the space is its mediated fantasy element. This is what was promised by the *Dungeons & Dragons* box as,

> A way for us to imagine together – sort of like reading the same book, or dreaming the same dream. But it's a book that YOU can write, without putting a word on paper – just by playing a D&D game.

Mediation in theatre and games takes on radically different forms but can be observed as moving towards similar goals. Action in theatre is most often mediated by props and stage effects, whereas games are mediated through control systems and interfaces. Guns may appear to really fire, or rain to really fall while agency can be actioned using controls and an interface to cause otherwise static characters to spring to life. The function of these mediating elements is to smooth the transition between reality and the drama or play-space. It serves the same role as the explicit portrayal of the photorealistic in film and the non-portrayal and imaginative freedom offered by literature.

The effect of this constant compromise from the receiver and constant mediation through the textual channel is that the mode of engagement becomes a malleable aspect of the experience rather than a fixed one. In theatre and in games the proximity of the audience to the text enables the suspension of disbelief to be manipulated in a more personal and immediate fashion than other media allow for. The boundaries of the space in terms of the mode of engagement have potential to be toyed with by the play's author or the players (in both senses) themselves, to effect distinctly different changes in the construction of the experience. These can range from causing pause to question the entire edifice and all that that pause entails, through to focusing belief and drawing the audience closer into the action by seemingly extending the borders of the diegesis to include them more directly. When the players rather than the text manipulate these boundaries, the result is either a kind of 'improvised drama' or 'emergent gameplay' of both the role-playing and rocket-jumping persuasions (King & Krzywinska 2005, p.17). The similarity between improvisation and emergent gameplay comes about through the form of bounded experimentation that both entail. Not breaking the rules of the space or the suspension of disbelief directly, but instead working with materials extant in the space to add personal touches, develop characters or implications in a particular direction or even exploit rules to gain a competitive

advantage. These internal boundary manipulations allow participants to work upon the central text in a similar manner to authored external boundary manipulations'[21] effects upon participants. This editing effect is most apparent in large mainstream online games which remould or re-release themselves to some extent in response to particular player activities, but also exists in the more glacially-paced evolution of genres and archetypal game forms. Online games make good examples since the experience is of a persistent world whose rules and construction change gradually over the long term, yet is beset with forms of emergent or fast-changing gameplay in the short term, so changes are brought about in response to players with an emphasis on extending, perpetuating or defending the gameplay core. As Shakespeare's *Henry V* can be reset in the trenches of the first world war; various improvisations spun off of the same script by the players to create an entity that is both manifestly different and similar to the original, so *World Of Warcraft* is able to spawn different rule sets, items and spatial functions such as emotes conducive to role-playing in its various expansions, and *Team Fortress 2* (Valve 2007) is able to design around and incorporate the originally game-breaking pleasures of the *Team Fortress Classic* (Valve 1999) rocket jump. This also highlights core textual malleability and reconfiguration potential as the primary similarity between games and theatre, as well as re-emphasising that the fundamental similarity between these two media is one of structure.

Gaming is a heavily mediated experience, and this mediation stems from both inside and outside the text, if we take the screen to represent a rough and ready guide to this particular division. Outside the text mediations are apparent in the various paraphernalia necessary in order to interact with the game, which runs the gamut from standard mice, keyboards or gamepads through to virtual stand-in golf clubs in *Wii Sports* (Nintendo 2006). These can act as barriers preventing access to the text at all unless compatible hardware is obtained and understood. Within the text mediation takes place through interfaces and the unique relationship with a control set required to relate efficiently and effectively to different individual games even within a single genre. Such mediations are active obstacles that must be negotiated, and can be enjoyed as part of the method of interaction, the reading process of games. Difficult or at first counter-intuitive interfaces present hurdles to

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[21] I am hesitant at this point to call this the 'breaking of the fourth wall' since this metaphorical description works only in theatre and is less relevant descriptively for games, as is discussed further on in this chapter and in chapter 6.

engagement that can even intensify when games form part of the same ludic genre or narrative theme, yet require subtly different processes be undertaken in order to communicate with them. This is particularly true of MMO-RPGs, where the vast majority follow the interfacing template originally laid down by *Everquest* (Sony, 1999), but with their own unique twists and tweaks which can often prove infuriating for the gamer versed in *Everquest* grammar. Of course this can also work in reverse: *Braid* (Number None, 2008)*,* an eccentric puzzle-platformer which deals with fairly subtle and complicated time manipulation mechanics hides its depths under a faithful copy of the bold and simple *Super Mario Bros.* visual grammar and control system. On the other hand, sometimes simply taming this awkward and savage textual machine to accomplish what you intend is central to the challenge posed by games, as is the case in complex, unforgiving beat-em-up genre games such as the *Virtua Fighter* series (Sega, 1997-ongoing). In theatre the textual mechanics are often on display, but very rarely something that is grappled with so explicitly by the audience, nor do they function as a challenge posed to the players, with the possible exception of '*exit, pursued by a bear*' (*The Winter's Tale*, III:3). This distinction sets the gamer and the theatre audience member at odds, and also throws into question how 'active' the two modes of engagement really are.

Since gaming requires active engagement with the mediating machinery in order to get at the text in a meaningful way, the gamer and the theatrical audience occupy different positions. The act of gaming pre-supposes a degree of control while the watching of theatre lacks this directly and remains largely receptive. The pre-written nature of drama is not what motivates this difference, rather the position of audience and players relative to each other. Even unscripted, improvised theatre maintains the separation between the agency-empowered performers and the receiving audience. This can be turned on its head if the audience's suspension of disbelief is considered the driving force of the entire experience, the place where the message is transferred. However the fact remains that there can be a play with no audience, but no game without players. This results in an agency shift from inside the text where characters enact agency and authored messages designed to be read or received, to outside the text where that agency and enacting potential is wielded, to some extent at least, by the player. Theatrical audiences, though they may even go on stage

occasionally, are resolutely not in control of any part of the textual *machinery*, while it can be manipulated and wrestled with by the gamer.

Perhaps the primary difference between the two modes of engagement is one of presumption. Theatrical experiences are predicated upon the audience's suspension of disbelief, considering it part of the experience and theirs to remould in whichever direction they care to. Games are simply too diverse and videogames too young a medium to allow for any such presumption when approaching them. The fourth wall in theatre is presumed by both sides until it is actively broken, the generic theatre audience do need to engage in a constant act of will but it is a socially negotiated single allowance. By comparison the gamer must make vastly more allowances for games in order to reach a position equivalent to that of a receptive theatre audience member. If determined to observe the experience the same way the gamer has no choice but to sacrifice themselves, their own role and the chaotic factor they represent from the 'perfect reading' of the text rather than the grimy experience gameplay can often be relative to the story told.

Games take up and use theatrical devices, and in doing so hark back to the theatrical mode of engagement. 'Stages' are not an incidentally shared term between the lexicons of games and theatre. In both senses stages are bounded spaces where agency can be enacted. The interference of the grind of the greater textual machine's reconfiguring happens between scenes or stages. Loading screens cloak the bulk of the scene-setting in many modern titles, overlaying the screen with an 'intermission' image as the scene is built from lines and textures behind it, only raising this evolved form of curtain when the gamescape is in a fit state to be seen. Numerous bounded rule set spaces within games are fairly universal and span genres. *Lumines's* (Q Entertainment, 2004) shifting skins, *Everquest's* zones *and Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney's* (Capcom, 2001) switching from 'trial' to 'investigation' gameplay modes are diverse examples of ludic patterns' reinforcement through staging. Many modern games still point out a shift of stage or scene as explicitly as they emphasise the 'press start' and 'game over' traditions, scene or level changes persist as game genres evolve and shift. These are comfortable conventions arrived at by designers and players over gaming's history. From a narrative perspective, theatrical devices in games come to the fore when player-controlled avatars need to interact with NPCs. The guts of many single-player role-playing games resemble a random-access play-script where the player

cues each separate line or 'event' exchange. Perspective and Interactive storytelling found expression in *Façade*(Procedural Arts, 2005), which consciously casts the player as a player in a one-act play. This re-casting invokes the theatrical mode of engagement and fosters an allowance that gamers can and will inevitably see the same pieces of text or hear the same voiced dialogue multiple times over the course of a gaming session. Accepting that this discourse is part of a script or more distant message being communicated through the experience involves elements of the theatrical mode of engagement being brought to the fore over those aspects of the suspension of disbelief which are unique to games, challenging the text parser-limitation of adventure games discussed in the literature section above by actively leveraging the medium of the theatre. Thus stages and actors, although morphed into the constraints of the media, remain a persistent presence in videogames.

When games or game narratives work to manipulate the boundaries of the experiential space by design, to some extent they replicate the device of 'breaking the fourth wall' in theatre. This is separate to the manipulation of diegesis as discussed above in the film section or the self-referential tropes discussed in relation to literature. It is also distinct from games' own advances against the fourth wall, which are discussed in detail in chapter five. Extra-textual reference or intra-textual self reference can come in many forms and needn't work counter to immersion, rather re-defining the play-space to incorporate the player directly, challenging them to set their position relative to the tale being told. Playwrights and game designers do not explicitly and always shift and change their textual boundaries in such ways, and to some extent it is the novelty of 'breaking the fourth wall' that empowers this device. Standing out against the background of manifestly different norms in each medium, the effect of manipulating the boundaries by design has similar consequences.

A cursory comparison might place games and theatre poles apart, since theatre involves such physical closeness to the text itself being played out around the audience, and games are so heavily mediated through not only screens and the audio/visual rhetorics of film but also through control devices and, on a narrative level often the interpretative, slower paced rhetorics of language and literature. However, this analysis has shown that in terms of the mode of engagement, suspension of disbelief in games functions in several similar ways to that within theatre, with crucial caveats that not only distinguish the modes from each other

but also govern the way in which theatrical tropes and entreaties to the theatrical mode of engagement are relevant in gamescapes.

Suspension of disbelief in games and theatre are unified through comparable physical spatial relations of audience relative to text, and a similar persistent cognitive effort being necessitated to maintain the textual transmission through either channel. This work requires that many allowances be made and transgressions forgiven in this take on 'poetic faith', a belief in something greater than the reality being shown to or happening around the receiver. Although theatre and game audiences are manifestly different in terms of the location of agency, they are united in the requirement that a continuum of disbelief be constructed between the text and the receiver through or even often in spite of the reality of the text, although simultaneously entirely inspired by it. We actively believe in the potential of theatre and games in spite of what might appear demonstrable shortcomings, and are rewarded by spaces with the same active potential. This potential is what generates the similar consistency of the fourth wall in these two media. However, spatial conventions which validated and made the term 'fourth wall' directly relevant in theatre may not survive the transition from passive audience-receiver to active player-receiver, fundamentally changing how the effects of this boundary-shifting textual mechanism are generated. Since this is playing upon elements of the mode of engagement itself, the reconstitution of a ludic fourth wall will form a further area of examination in chapter five. Observing the active suspension of disbelief in theatre and games brings into sharp relief the limitations of passivity in film and in literature.

Comparing and contrasting games with film, theatre and literature as well as looking at how some of their devices are rolled into games has helped to shed light on both the difference of games to those other media and the way in which each media emphasizes a particular facet of the suspension of disbelief, even in its still undefined form. Literature, as we concluded, works most upon the 'suspension' element, while film hangs around 'disbelief' and theatre around 'will'. It is no great surprise that different modes of engagement make different demands of the reader, but this does become interesting when contrasted with the problems that games' use of these media throws up. This thesis is resistant to the notion that games are a hybrid media, preferring to view them as a discrete media type which makes use of others on occasion. Many games do feel like hybrid media experiences though,

when the use of a device grates too heavily with the gameplay structure attempting to make use of it. These pressure points are helpful for our purposes, since they can show where gamers' suspension of disbelief is focused. These stresses are detailed in the above and have been touched upon and debated widely in Games Studies: text parsers struggling to respond to skilled gamers' reading (Aarseth, 1997, Murray, 1998), cut-scenes or quicktime events stealing focus and agency from the gamer's gaze and transferring it to the spectacle gaze of the film viewer (Klevjer 2002, Juul, 2005), and fourth wall manipulations galvanising the ludo-diegesis (Galloway, 2006, Pinchbeck, 2007, Gee, 2009, Conway, 2010), working against dissonance by enhancing a sense of player participation or authorship in opposition to the device's theatrical usage. The results of this sort of use do not break the games in question, and in fact in the latter example often make it much stronger, but they do require engaging with on their own terms. It is interesting that these questions seem misaligned relative to the elements of suspension of disbelief emphasized by the media they come out of. Skill, and skilled readers suggest quite the opposite of any kind of 'suspension', agency is almost diametrically opposed to 'disbelief' and the 'will' to empower theatrical proceedings is challenged by the possibility of actual, meaningful audience authorship. These issues of skill, agency and questions of authorship also represent elements of the game form that are unique to it and not covered by any of the other three media, they will form the basis of the questions regarding suspension of disbelief in games that the rest of this thesis will investigate. What other text can challenge, enable and literally encompass its receiver, often all at once and entirely mechanically, without any action on the receiver's part?

Skilled readers, cut-scenes and the fourth wall have all been debated by many games scholars before, as study of games as a media type began in earnest. They have been used to defend and attack the idea of games as texts or a nascent narrative medium (Kirkpatrick 2011). While the debate has now shifted on from definitions to the idea of how games generate 'meaning', these elements still resonate, albeit at different frequencies. They are some of the central interpretative challenges of games, and it has become clear from this analysis that any enquiry regarding suspension of disbelief in the medium must address player skill, agency, and the question of authorship. With this in mind, it is now possible to return to the suspension of disbelief itself and begin unpicking that phrase. In doing so this chapter has enabled us to keep one eye on what makes games a unique, different medium

in need of their own mode of engagement. Once we have a better grasp of just what suspension of disbelief as a term is describing, it will be possible to turn to games' own take on the suspension of disbelief which deals with the distinctions from other media described so far.

Chapter 2 – Defining suspension of disbelief

Through examination of different modes of engagement as well as the differences which set games apart from other media, so far in this thesis suspension of disbelief has been observed in action. Looking at games and literature brought the issue of reader skill to the fore, looking at film brought up the issue of agency and looking at theatre raised questions of authorship as an important distinction. These major differences need to be investigated further in order to chisel out how suspension of disbelief works in games. However, before analysing these complexities, it is important to pin down exactly what the phrase is defining. This will entail travelling a long way from videogames for a time, to enable a return to them better informed about how the suspension of disbelief has been defined and used in other contexts. This will help us understand whether or not 'suspension of disbelief' is the right term to be using still now several centuries after it was coined, and also begin to unpack the process it refers to in order to better understand how it works. Suspension of disbelief in other media has been theorised by philosophers of aesthetics, literary and play theorists and psychoanalytic critics, all of whose conclusions should help inform this thesis's approach to suspension of disbelief in videogames. By the end of this chapter we will have come to a understanding of what is meant by the phrase, as well as providing an evolved position on the unique aspects of games' relationship with the suspension of disbelief produced through the dimensions of skill and agency as well as framed by questions of authorship.

In his sprawling work of aesthetic philosophy *Biographia Literaria* first published in 1817,(1985), Samuel Taylor Coleridge coins the term 'suspension of disbelief' and describes it as the driving force behind the composition of his and William Wordsworth's collection of individual works *Lyrical Ballads* (1798). To some extent this piece constitutes a manifesto for the Romantics, and it is worth citing this passage in full since the phrase has become the *de facto* referent for this complex concept:

> In this idea originated the plan of the "Lyrical Ballads"; in which it was agreed, that my endeavors should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic; yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that

willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith. Mr. Wordsworth, on the other hand, was to propose to himself as his object, to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us; an inexhaustible treasure, but for which, in consequence of the film of familiarity and selfish solicitude we have eyes, yet see not, ears that hear not, and hearts that neither feel nor understand. (Coleridge 1817 p.6)

Both were working towards the same end, the generation in the reader of 'poetic faith', yet from opposite directions. Coleridge sutures reality into the fantastic in such a way that it contains for the reader, and by virtue of their journey, an echo of truth. Simultaneously, Wordsworth would approach the same outcome from the other direction, empowering the vernacular with the embellishing effects of poetry. Where the two cross over is in an assumption of the galvanising value of the fantastic relative to the real. It can awake wonder in the 'inexhaustible treasure' of the real when approached from either direction.

Coleridge's obsession with justifying his own work against criticism, which to some extent motivated the writing of the above piece, is also present in *Lyrical Ballads.* The work's construction is such that the tones and climates of poems bleed into one another, and the reader is primed, moulded, positioned by Coleridge's prefaces into the author's idea of the perfect frame of mind for the reception of each poem. Interestingly Coleridge's conception of 'poetic faith' had as much to do with the reader as the author. He is constantly conscious of a need to cajole or jostle the reader into his perceived 'ideal' receptive state, generating a favourable climate to move from the standard, normalized prose of the preface into the terrain of uncharted and multifaceted poetry. The device is used twice in one poem in *Lyrical Ballads,* Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* where a preface is followed up by the fantastic events of the poem being themselves framed as a tale told to an at first sceptical narrator. However, the standout example of its use is elsewhere in the book; the famous 'Person from Porlock' introduction to *Kubla Khan*, where Coleridge, or his narrator defends (in a preface almost as long as the whole poem) the piece's status as a dream vision born of possession, and blames its construction as a fragment on an unwanted visitor arriving in the midst of the author's creative fervour, breaking the trance. This serves the

triple purpose of distancing Coleridge himself from supposedly divinely inspired work, romanticizing the figure of the author and creating a fictional world where writing complex poetry is no longer ninety-nine percent perspiration. The tale told prior to the poem is a framing apparatus designed to acclimatise the reader, preparing them for the way the new textual space of the poem will function. These prefaces act as poetic devices outside the poem, a kind of launch pad or bridging structure devoted to the creation of the cherished 'poetic faith'. Coleridge is telling us that as readers we all begin as 'persons from Porlock' who must journey from that drab, colourless, normative place to fantastic Xanadu, where the beauty of the world is enhanced through the subtleties of verse. The reader never gets to Xanadu, all that they see is the fragment represented by the poem, but somewhere between prose and poetry and someway between serious and playful, Coleridge touches upon in a literary sense the same element that Huizinga would later isolate as core to poetry – play or the playful. The space intruded upon by the person from Porlock contains a fleeting, glimpsed figure conjured momentarily by a collision between prose, poetry and play, a figure Huizinga sums up in his discussion of poetry:

> *Poiesis*, in fact, is a play-function. It proceeds within the play-ground of the mind, in a world of its own which the mind creates for it. There things have a different physiognomy from the one they wear in 'ordinary life', and are bound by ties other than those of logic and causality… the true appellation of the archaic poet is *vates*, the possessed, the God-smitten, the raving one. (Huizinga 1955 p. 141-142)

It is helpful to apply Roland Barthes' notion of the 'death of the author' (1977 ch.7) to this preface in particular, since it occupies ambiguous terrain on the levels of both textual structure and authorial intention, being part of the fiction of the poem yet structurally ancillary to the poem proper, both a defence of the piece by the author and simultaneously an abrogation of authorial responsibility. While its motivations seem to be to free the work (alongside Coleridge himself) from what Barthes would define as one form of interpretative tyranny, its being constituted as a preface and a defence makes up another. Coleridge is certainly attempting to checkmate the reader into suspending their disbelief without explicitly asking them to, but it is not simply to serve his own ends, as Robert Hodge and David Tripp seem to intimate in their 'modal' definition of the suspension of disbelief when

deploying it as part of a broader agenda regarding the media 'effects' debate and whether or not events on television are perceived to be real by viewers:

> Coleridge…talked of the "willing suspension of disbelief" as essential to the proper response to literary works. That is, the belief that a work is literary leads you to cancel out your dominant modality system – in the interests of a higher level of response, not a lower one. (Hodge & Tripp 1987, pp103)

Looking back at the preface, we can see the flaws in this definition, setting the suspension of disbelief up as the enforcement of actual 'belief' in the work's literary credentials. Rather, the aim is to modify the way the poem is experienced, since *Kubla Khan* only resonates on the manifold levels it can reach because of the preface, and without the preface it loses narrative coherency. In addition, the switch of mode between the preface and the poem proper enhances this effect, itself being constitutive of the suspension of disbelief. As Ferri (2007) indicates, Coleridge connected his idea of disbelief with dreaming and described the figure of the dreamer in a letter to Daniel Stuart as follows: "it is not strictly accurate to say, that we believe our dreams to be actual while we are dreaming. We neither believe nor disbelieve it."(Griggs 1959, p.61) In *Kubla Khan*, Coleridge crowbars the reader into the position of this dreamer, the location from which suspension of disbelief comes most naturally. While it may seem that the defence against direct criticism due to the special status of the literary is the purpose of the preface, getting the reader into this role is an equally important element of this meta-fictional strategy. The secondary goal of *Kubla Khan*, and part of why it is such a powerful poem is the tacit acceptance of the reader to the playing of the audience role offered by Coleridge. These self-referential (if we consider them a core part of the literary work) appeals to the reader are rhetorical by design.

The percolation of the personal emotional response to nature down through the poetic imagination and composition process onto the page was the essence of the Romantic movement. Reaction against the rationalist enlightenment's reasoned, collective mentality manifested as personal, implausibly magical assertions of imaginative potential firmly grounded in reality. More recently this assertion of a binary difference between the romantic scientists and artists (mostly constructed by Praz, 1970) has been challenged by theorists who observe the intent and methodologies of scientists in the period to be infused

with romantic and gothic intent (Holmes, 2009). The personal, textual response to nature which defines this romantic mindset can equally be defined as the ability and desire to 'procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith' (Coleridge 1817 p.6). This notion of 'poetic faith' is amongst the most enduring contributions made by the Romantics to modern textual construction. However, Coleridge and his contemporaries were giving voice to and experimenting with a fundamental element of narrative. They were tapping into a debate surrounding the nature of belief characterised by competing Cartesian and Spinozan schools of thought, addressed further on in this chapter when some psychological elements of suspension of disbelief are examined. Calling this element the 'suspension of disbelief' certainly rolls off the tongue. The phrase is almost a double negative, telling us to stop doing something we aren't actively doing, but also asking us to believe in 'disbelief' in the first place. While Coleridge saw this as a submission by the (critical) reader to the (privileged) author, it is possible, while our attention is drawn to the crux of this relationship, to see other angles. Complicity between receiver and creator is possible when one is aware of suspending one's disbelief, and both are aware of the contract, especially since this action is free and 'willing'. Conversely the act of suspending one's disbelief can be observed as a challenge from author to reader, which to some extent is more apparent in Wordsworth's take on the problem than Coleridge's. Challenging the reader to make more out of the material placed before them than may seem initially apparent, to suspend their initial disbelief in the literary qualities *of* the vernacular, was one method of unlocking the 'inexhaustible treasure of the real'. These two sides of the effect persist into more recent attempts to generate 'poetic faith'. A rudimentary example of the former aspect is the Hollywood translation convention of using a few lines of a non-English language before switching to (often purposefully heavily accented) English in order to avoid the use of subtitles in fast-paced movies, while the latter finds form in self-conscious 'art- games' such as *Flower* (SCEE, 2009), which evokes feelings and potential narratives through a set of mechanics and gameplay that function perfectly well on their own and yet are set before the player as an artistic, coherent object, implicitly challenging on a narrative level.

It is important to note that the passage introducing the concept of suspension of disbelief is Coleridge's reading of Wordsworth's element of the manifesto, written long after the event

of *Lyrical Ballads* publication, and to some extent represents Coleridge attempting to test his theory's potential. Drawing attention to the act of suspension of disbelief itself is always an awkward dislocation since to some extent admitting to it at all dispels its primary effect, at least as far as Coleridge and, to a great extent, traditional notions of storytelling are concerned[22]. Elements of Brecht's 'Verfremdungseffekt' or 'distancing effect' stand in opposition to this notion (equivalent to the concept of 'illusionism' in film theory) but also utilize its pervasive reach across medias to empower the devices of 'epic theatre' which consciously seeks to dispel any notion of suspension of disbelief.[23]

Thus the creation of a suspension of disbelief was the goal of Coleridge's process, something he could 'procure' for his fantastic characters through his writing. The major step the Romantic imagination takes through literature comprises the pursuit of this effect rather than actual belief. The early world-crafting endeavours that surrounded Thomas More's *Utopia* (in Bruce, 1999, first published 1516) in the form of supporting materials including maps and documentation showcase the pursuit of actual belief rather than suspended disbelief in this period. The "hoax that was utopia" (Bruce 1999, p.xliii) was carefully engineered to give credence to the idea that the fictional land More's narrator tells of could really exist. This later calling of attention to the illusory effect however, with Coleridge writing in his role as an philosopher of aesthetics, only serves to highlight how much of its power resides in its transitory nature. Temporality as an element of the aesthetic experience is also firmly wrapped up in Coleridge's definition, since suspension of disbelief is, in his words, both willed and 'for the moment'. When Ferri (2007) writes in defence of the continuing relevance of Coleridge's phrase, his most common criticism of other theorists who dismiss or attempt to render it reductive is that they are ignorant of both its actual textual and historical context. Often theorists are brought to book when the preceding 'willing' is skipped over in the shorthand, but Ferri is more hesitant to point out when theorists dismiss the following 'for the moment'. I would argue that particularly where games are concerned, this element of the phrase is crucial. The existence in the now that it invokes seems more relevant to the participatory media of games than perhaps to the films which are Ferri's primary object of study, and we have discussed how the temporal aspect

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[22] This is not to imply that techniques such as narrators' direct addressing of the reader dispel the suspension of disbelief, often direct address can be knowingly used as a part of the fiction.
[23] Brecht is discussed in more depth during chapter six.

of the suspension of disbelief process caused certain elements to be emphasised over others in chapter one (page 21). As such, in order to clarify exactly what we are dealing with, reiterating the full phrase "willing suspension of disbelief for the moment", seems the most appropriate baseline from which to move towards a more nuanced definition.

The entire phrase displays, even outside of its context, a wholeness that accounts for the entirety of a reading experience, conceding that any genuine form of narrative transportation, empathic connection or immersion must remain both activated, consciously or unconsciously and transitory, even fleeting. It is this effect that crosses over from other media into videogames, but changes in the process. This is the effect whose contours this thesis seeks to begin to map. Ferri cites Julia Hallam and Margaret Marshment (1998 p.122), who incidentally pick out a playful, potentially ludic side to Coleridge's phrase which often goes unnoticed, but adds his own take, showing how he considers Coleridge's 'shadows of imagination' to refer to a location rather than, potentially, to characters or his fictions as a whole:

> the hallmark of a good book or play is its potential, in the words of Coleridge, to suspend our disbelief…to play a game of make-believe when we engage with them." These games are played out in the 'shadows of imagination. (Ferri 2007 p.xiii)

The 'shadows of imagination' have different hues in different media and might, as Ferri argues, now constitute more place than person, but the effect that is being sought remains constant. If anything, these revisions of the imaginative position away from character and into a space work in videogames' favour. The next chapter will demonstrate that a sense of suspension of disbelief is sought after not only by videogame writers, world designers and marketing teams, but also by designers of the more abstract game systems that make up the cores of the experience that these others work alongside or around.

The phrase 'suspension of disbelief' has been criticised as overly broad and all-encompassing (Salzstein 1989, in Ferri 2007 p.13), as well as a simplistic 'toggle-theory'[24] of engagement (Gerrig 1998 p.201-2), while the effect that it describes is generally agreed to exist, and never denied altogether. There is a wide consensus that *something* is happening,

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[24] Gerrig's primary criticism of the suspension of disbelief and other similar theories is that they consider being transported into a text to be a process that can be toggled on and off like a light switch.

the disagreement tends to focus upon which critical faculties are being taken offline, how this occurs and whether it is desirable. It also seems clear that there are two specific sides of the object of study in question. One is the suspension of disbelief *act*, the act of will or engagement which Coleridge entreats of his reader, and the other is the suspension of disbelief *effect*, the payoff and transported state that results from this act. The suspension of disbelief effect can certainly be examined, and as we go on to attempt to define and locate it in more detail some of these concerns can begin to be addressed. However, while it is not my intent as the object of this exercise to defend the phrase in any particular way, I would argue that many of the criticisms put towards it come from critics working within media types with long histories and well-established theoretical bedrocks. Videogame theorists are fortunate enough to be able to borrow or draw upon much of this work, and although now well past the trailblazing stage it is still the case that our understanding of how videogame texts really work needs expanding. These more mature media have texts that question themselves and the process of reading as a regular occurrence, rather than the very small, but growing, minority of games that explicitly tell stories or build mechanics with a narrative awareness of the 'fourth wall' or explicitly self-referential dimension of the new media. As such many of the limitations that the broader concept of suspension of disbelief throws up for theatre or literature can become boons for the games studies research community. When games as a media critique their own form as a matter of course, this will no longer be the case. It is unlikely that the anatomization of the actual reading processes that Richard Gerrig (1998) and Wolfgang Iser (1976) observe and experiment with could have been possible without at first having approached literature, reading and reader-response with broader questions. Brecht's take on drama would not have been possible while the medium was still young, in flux and constantly evolving, settling into the rut which the distancing effect tried to snap it out of. In conclusion, while it is important not to remain hung up on an 18th Century phrase as the definition of the effect under scrutiny just because of how it sounds, seeking out Coleridge's suspension of disbelief and poetic faith warts and all in gamers and game designs is far from a futile endeavour, providing a lens for closer examination what occurs when we play games.

Moving on from the term itself, what is the suspension of disbelief actually describing? There seems to be a theoretical and a practical angle to the suspension of disbelief effect.

Narrative, aesthetic, psychoanalytic and play theorists have considered how we read texts, how we respond to them and where our imagination goes, which together comprise the generation of poetic faith. This process is often referred to as 'being transported' or 'illusion'. In some contexts, especially those relating to games, the word 'immersion' is another synonym. As Ferri notes when discussing the wider context of the phrase as part of Coleridge's body of works, this process of being transported is overarched by an array of socio-cultural and historical contexts:

> Coleridge seems to attribute a range of effect or efficacy to artistic works. The work can be so incredible as to be "over the top". One need only consider the comic reaction of a contemporary   audience watching a science fiction film of the 1950s … alternatively the work can be right on target and absorb the audience as in the film *Jaws* (1975). (2007, p.8)

These perspectives and contexts are relevant and necessary if we are to come to a balanced definition of suspension of disbelief. Looking at the effect from these distinct viewpoints can allow us to focus in better upon elements of it that will be relevant when seeking it out within games.

Literary and aesthetic theory – the problem of the 'skilled' reader.

Narrative theory calls into question the borders between the real and the imagined, and tries to factor in the suspension of disbelief. Iser (1976) and Gerrig (1998) focus upon the act of reading itself as the catalyst of the imagination and mediator between the real and imaginary. Iser calls the possibility of a total suspension of disbelief on the part of the reader "an ideal whose desirability is questionable", and asks "would the role offered by the text function properly if it were totally accepted?" (Iser 1976, p.37). Instead, Iser defends the reader's separation from the text, but suggests that two selves rather than a single reader are in play. This is not to add yet another imaginary filter to the increasingly crowded corridor between the author and the reader but rather split the reader, still at one end of the chain, into two. Iser settles on the notion of role-play, just as Coleridge did when crafting *Kubla Khan* :

The suggestion that there are two selves is certainly tenable, for these are the role offered by the text and the reader's own disposition, and as the one can never be fully taken over by the other, there arises between the two the tension we have described. (Ibid)

The first self offered by the text has many similarities with Coleridge's dreamer, and the 'tension' Iser refers to is the act of suspension of disbelief, a state the reader should aspire towards rather than something to be overcome. So at a basic level, Iser's conception of the reader, or at least the second self, has much in common with Stuart Hall's (1980) 'decoding' audience member, who brings cultural baggage to the text in order to accept, negotiate or reject outright its proffered meaning. However, Iser's reader operates on the level of imaginative connection rather than cultural meaning, of live immersion 'for the moment' rather than post-mortem dissection of the meaning that can be carried away from the experience and reapplied to reality. Iser evolves and defends this approach when he reveals it was inspired by Wayne Booth's 'implied author' –

The author creates, in short, an image of himself and another image of his reader; he makes his reader, as he makes his second self. (Booth 1963 p.137)

This psychological process builds a reader who has to fill in gaps, or 'blanks' between the presented text and his own reading of it through the act of interpretation:

This blank is not a given, ontological fact, but is formed and modified by the imbalance inherent in dyadic interactions, as well as that between text and reader. Balance can only be attained if the gaps are filled, and so the constitutive blank is continually bombarded with projections. (Iser 1976 p.167)

Filling in these blanks without reference to the text or the textual would, in Iser's eyes constitute a failure, a breakdown in communication, so only one option is left:

Now as the blank gives rise to the reader's projections, but the text itself cannot change, it follows that a successful relationship between text and reader can only come about through changes in the reader's projections. (ibid)

This gap-filling form of suspension of disbelief refocuses interpretative power away from the reader, who is now not so much in control of their response to the text as in thrall to the text's own structure of blanks to be filled and specific negations disallowing set fillings for those blanks. Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* preface could be read according to Iser's theory as a massive catch-all negation, itself accomplishing entirely what it entreats its readers to do willingly. The difference in this reformulation of the preface is that the rhetorical impact of it as a literary component of the text is itself negated. It no longer plays its stylish trick on the reader, but instead crystallises, locks in the reading style it sets out to attain at the cost of its ability to persuade. Its effects on the reader are purely negatory by this analysis, whereas objectively it is much harder to dismiss the preface's rhetorical power as part of what makes the reader desire to take up the role it proffers. While Coleridge's other prefaces collected in *Lyrical Ballads*, especially that of *Christabel*, may seem so earnest that they start to sound like outright negation, nevertheless they share degrees of this rhetorical dimension, and are equally connected to their poems. It sometimes seems that Iser's split reader is susceptible to the dyadic relationship, and Booth's image of two signified 'second' selves communicating with one another comes once again to the fore, except now their composition has been made more explicit. To sum up, we can move one lens away from the text composed of dyadic relationships to see a second self woven from this composition, a potential reading's signifier seeing its signified in the reader. Taking this up, negations and all, is the act of suspension of disbelief, and viewing the text through the perspective it allows, unaware of the negations that compose it, is the suspension of disbelief effect. Will, in this example, is not only the motivation to actually read the text, but also the urge to reach this privileged agreement with it. This helps us to deepen the idea of a role being offered by text to reader, and see how it could take form from the building blocks of language and through the process of reading.

Gerrig (1998) dissects the process of experiencing narrative worlds further, building upon Iser's work and isolating inferences and schema as some of the building blocks necessary to result in suspension of disbelief. Gerrig walks a tightrope between two metaphors: that of being wholly transported to another world, and an evolution of the role-playing angle that positions the reader as performer within these textual spaces. He concludes that this is necessary since

Just as I was concerned that being transported projects an undue aura of passivity, the performance metaphor appears to presuppose too active an involvement of conscious attention. (Gerrig 1998 p.19)

Interestingly for our purposes, given that we have already touched upon the importance of skill to the media under scrutiny, Gerrig acknowledges that his approach leaves some readers behind, focusing in on the notion of 'reading skill' and declaring it ancillary to his goals at the time, while admitting its importance:

In parallel to the differentiation of good actors and poor actors, we can identify more and less skilled readers (and thus, presumably people who are more and less skilled in interpreting stories in on-going conversation or in following the details of a movie, and so on). These details are in fact nontrivial because less-skilled readers find it harder to become thoroughly immersed in narrative. (Ibid)

Gerrig breaks down the comprehension process and begins to answer the question of how we suspend our disbelief by pointing to inferences and schema. Skill remains of importance, since one of the values of this approach is the decoupling of literacy and comprehension. One's skill at comprehension, born out of one's ability to utilise schema to produce inferences, may be greater than, or even stand in for, one's technical literacy. Inferences, clustered into schema, are active supplementations we make as readers to the texts presented to us. Gerrig puts it succinctly: "Although we cannot see her lower torso, we are quite willing to infer that Mona Lisa has legs." (Ibid, 29) Logically drawing inferences from and alongside schema is the method by which readers bridge gaps and are split into two separate categories:

Inferences that are constructed as part of the moment-by-moment experience of the narrative world and those that are constructed from outside the narrative world. (ibid p.44)

Thus Gerrig presents an almost diegetic barrier where non-diegetic 'outside' inferences of skill and forward planning actually erode the ability of the reader to bridge the text's internal gaps. Given his approach, it appears strange that he appeals back to the metaphor of 'being transported' as his defence, since it seems to throw his terminology into jeopardy

and suggest that, at least as far as games and players are concerned, a replacement of 'skill' with 'ability' would perhaps be worthwhile. This is worth pursuing, since skill was one of the three areas isolated in chapter one as unique to gaming's suspension of disbelief (page 55). Gerrig sheds light upon that element by suggesting a correlation between skill and ease of suspension of disbelief, directly in opposition to what we observed in the previous chapter. Given the value of the term both to the medium of games and its relevance simultaneously to ideas of mastery, comprehension and interpretative ability, problematising the term 'skill' instead of replacing it outright seems prudent. Gerrig's diegetic partitioning points us towards analysis of readers' positioning if we are to differentiate between that 'skill' which enables imaginative support of the text internally and that which, coming from outside, threatens it. In games, often a wresting of the comprehensive process from the grasp of the text occurs prior to being able to fully interact, as Perron & Arsenault (2009) put forward in their magic cycle model of game comprehension and its 'launch window' phase (discussed in further detail in chapter three). Gerrig's argument with Coleridge's original formulation of the process is that seeing our critical faculties as needing to be disengaged, or 'toggled' by an act of will depending upon the perceived fictive or non-fictive dimensions of the text disenfranchises fiction from having real-world effects, or causing changes in the mindset of the reader, culminating in a warning:

> The "willing suspension of disbelief" has often served as the foundational image on which theorists have built more modern forms of toggle theories. By referring to this phrase, theorists have accepted as given that the mental processes performed by readers of fiction are special to those experiences…they are often at a loss to account for the real-world effects of fictions. (ibid p.202)

Moving outside of the actual act of reading and back to the process of suspension of disbelief, the value of a willing suspension of disbelief has been disputed by authors and narrative theorists alike. Responding to Plato's banishing of the poets from his republic, Aristotle's *poetics* first describes the worth of tragedy as 'catharsis', meaning a cleansing or a purging, the true 'value' of this kind of art. What is being purged from the audience through catharsis are pent up emotions, played out on stage rather than in society, the art providing a release, a safety valve for the otherwise unpalatable or anti-social urges. Catharsis in this original context does clash with the idea of suspension of disbelief as a

gateway to enhanced appreciation of a text, having more in common with the Romantic idea of the sublime reaction than that of poetic faith. Suspension of disbelief and catharsis have quite a fraught relationship. Kant places disinterestedness at the core of his definition of art, and scholars who have written about suspension of disbelief at length (Holland 2009) have used this definition as the cornerstone of their framings of the suspension of disbelief effect. Games have long been held up as primarily cathartic experiences, perhaps unwittingly due to their many conventional connections with theatre as established in the previous chapter. This is especially the case when the argument is deployed as a defence for games in the 'media effects' debate. Something being a cathartic experience does not preclude it from being subject to a suspension of disbelief act or effect, since the catharsis carries over after the temporal experience has passed. However, Catharsis can be seen as making the suspension of disbelief less relevant as the experience becomes more literal, more bodily and less contemplative, especially if we are defining art through a Kantian lens.[25] Suspension of disbelief can even be observed to empower the cathartic effect not because an audience actually believes that the world presented to them is analogous to the real, but rather because, through suspension of disbelief, they have invoked some schema of the real and allowed inferences to spark off of them as well as from the text. Coleridge had less noble goals than Aristotle, being more concerned with the defence of art for its own sake than its utility value. In fact, it seems that adding a properly tailored theory of a ludic suspension of disbelief to invoking catharsis as a defence against the carrying over of videogame violence to reality could complete that argument, since it would place videogames on a par with media which have already dealt with that debate. It is hard to take catharsis much further than this, and in fact Brian Sutton-Smith (2001 p.89) cautions against it, citing numerous theorists who have failed to remould catharsis to their own ends.

Other writers have questioned the positioning, if not the spirit, of the suspension of disbelief. J.R.R. Tolkien (1939) grouped games with make-believe in his article 'On Fairy-stories', and stated that one could not suspend one's disbelief in a game, rather one 'condescends' to make the best out of an already failed text.

> Children are capable, of course, of *literary belief*, when the story-maker's art is good
> enough to produce it. That state of mind has been called "willing suspension of

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[25] Kant and this distancing element are returned to in depth during chapter four (page 144)

disbelief". But this does not seem to me a good description of what happens. What really happens is that the story-maker proves a successful sub-creator. He makes a secondary world which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is 'true': it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed. You are then out in the Primary World again, looking at the little abortive secondary world from outside. If you are obliged, by kindliness or circumstance, to stay, then disbelief must be suspended (or stifled), otherwise listening or looking would become intolerable. But this suspension of disbelief is a substitute for the genuine thing, a subterfuge we use when condescending to games or make-believe, or when trying (more or less willingly) to find what virtue we can in the work of an art that has, for us, failed. (Tolkien 1939, p.37)

Tolkien is certainly alluding here to children's games and play that connects more closely with the 'paidea' end of Callois' (1958) spectrum, but it is interesting that an author so caught up with the act of world-building in his own writing should react with such trepidation to the idea of make-believe. Tolkien looks down upon make-believe because it has no substance in the text itself, it is unsupported and as far as he is concerned it is the world-crafter or storyteller's function to provide a superstructure that transcends make-believe, locking the suspension of disbelief effect into the text itself as a property it exerts upon the reader. There is no lens of language in Tolkien's idealised example, but he is taking issue with the suspension of disbelief's privileging of the reader's will, questioning whether this is a necessary component of the reading experience. Although at this point Tolkien and Coleridge's positions may seem diametrically opposed, in truth both authors are defending the same thing. Tolkien's ideal reader is much the same as Coleridge's, certainly both are equally in thrall to the text. Both authors too seem to see their texts as worlds to be entered and inhabited, where different laws (or 'lores') are adhered to. Tolkien's 'virtue' has similarities with Coleridge's 'poetic faith'. The same lack of critical distance is the hallmark of the desired effect, but for Tolkien it is produced by the text and the artistic ability of the author while for Coleridge it is directly repressed by the reader. Tolkien's position relative to Coleridge also softens somewhat when we take into account that Tolkien is not talking about unswerving belief (which those who deal with games often like to call 'total

immersion', examined in detail in the next chapter) but rather qualified *'literary belief'*, and that he is writing to defend both the relevance of a type of writing and the capabilities of a particular class of reader. Coleridge, in both his prefaces and *Biographia Literaria*, is writing with one eye constantly fixed on the cold reality of an all-to-critical potential readership. He certainly isn't advocating make-believe or holding it up as equivalent to the suspension of disbelief. Tolkien's literary belief can be shattered by inadequate authors who craft insufficient lore, leaving readers high and dry with no choice but to deal with their own disbelief, and these authors are whom the anger is addressed to, rather than the concept of suspension of disbelief, which is framed as a get-out clause to disallow criticism of failed art.

While Coleridge settles upon reader role-play, Tolkien's 'successful sub-creator' is a master of rules, creating underpinning lore of reason and basis for all that they want their reader to believe. If Coleridge writes from an idealised player's perspective, Tolkien's is unabashedly that of the idealised designer, a literalist rather than a poet. Tolkien's literary belief is not formed by some magic textual power, but by coherent rules leaving no room for disbelief to arise. Thus in *Lord of The Rings* fantastic languages are freely used and the keys to understanding them provided, amazing journeys are anchored by a series of annotated maps and Old English poems such as *The Wanderer*, whose true origins are lost can be reframed, fully re-contextualized and allowed to shine anew. The real, historical context of these works was a central part of his project, anchoring the fictional world and offering its own fictive history a degree of this solidity .[26] Rules and world coherence are themselves a role-playing shell allowing for flights of imagination. It is not imagination and the creation of imaginative immersion that Tolkien writes to stifle, but rather lazy world-crafting which doesn't tie its rules together sufficiently. It is ironic that the author of Middle-earth, which would become such a rich textual space for role-playing-games of all stripes was himself so dismissive of the idea of role-play, preferring to see creation and storytelling as distinct from play and fantasy when in truth the links between them all are quite solid. It is hard to say, however, that Tolkien is factually incorrect regarding games as such, even in their evolved form as modern videogames. Tonally, though, his approach is not ideal, and a suspension of disbelief model for games which takes into account what he observes could challenge his

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[26] See Krzywinska et al (2011) for a much fuller investigation into this world-crafting and its connection to gaming.

conclusions regarding games. Two of the points Tolkien makes are most explicitly relevant to our investigation; firstly, that one must have some form of suspension, or 'stifling' of disbelief in order to be part of a game, and in addition that 'belief' in a world correlates with the world's own manifest internal coherence.

The gamer's position is distinct from the reader or audience discussed in the citations above in several respects. Primarily, passivity of any kind is not an option as a player, involvement is non-negotiable. The pleasures of watching games in-play as opposed to playing them falls outside the scope of this investigation, but forms an interesting cul-de-sac when we are theorising about games as a media type. The primary consumption method the modern videogame is built for is certainly direct play, and often direct play by multiple players simultaneously. While Hall (1980) and to some extent the other theorists mentioned so far are all attempting to defend their specific media audiences from the charge of passivity, such criticism cannot be levelled at games and players. Gamers' relationship with the text and their responses to or with it are so immediate that over-activity rather than passivity on the part of the player is the charge that needs defending against. Passivity or failure to react quickly enough to the cues provided by the text is one of the most common mechanics for failure and restarting games. Given this, it is difficult to say to what extent gamers need to walk Gerrig's tightrope between role-playing and immersion since they are certainly not passive, but neither are they always able to 'perform' outside of very limited capacities, still as rapt with 'conscious attention' as the audiences of other media who are doing less. Yet similarities return over the longer term, where gameplay and game narrative 'gestalts' (Lindley 2002, Brown 2007) merging together into gaming experiences can be observed as similar to the traversal of a literary text. Skill, too, is a crucial aspect of the player's textual experience and core to the pleasure of playing games. Gerrig's moderately 'skilled reader', who he defines as neither a high school student reading Shakespeare nor Sir Laurence Olivier (Gerrig 1998 p.19) but rather all that lies between, is capable of "performing the cognitive activities that enable them to be transported to narrative worlds" by default. While less relevant to movies, novels, theatre and poetry, which comprise the focus of Gerrig's material, this skill dimension flares up in games. When Gerrig holds up the importance and value of reading skill, he references Victor Nell (1988), and his conception of another familiar yet unfamiliar concept : 'ludic reading'.

Nell uses the term now used commonly by game theorists discussing gameplay or game criticism to refer to and defend a distinct reading type: reading for pleasure as opposed to reading for work, even going so far as to study the distinction between the two in a laboratory setting (ibid, ch.6). He also refers freely to 'suspension' and 'suspension strategies' as key to the act of reading itself, but his analysis is very much tied only to books and literature. Ludic reading's focus on the skill and pleasure dimension of reading combined with the acceptance of suspension of disbelief as a part of the process rings through to a more games studies sense of the 'ludic':

> the reader's assessment of a book's trance potential is probably the most important...contributor to the reward systems that keep ludic reading going once it has begun. (ibid, p.146)

 Nell sees the possibility of a ludic reading, almost a literary text's 'playability', as something tangible or even saleable, attributing much of the popularity of both *The Lord of The Rings* and Wilbur Smith bestsellers to this irresistible trance potential. the close link between skill and ludic reading that Nell identifies begins to showcase some of the new dimensions we must be aware of when analyzing how we suspend our disbelief in videogame environments.

From looking at how aesthetic philosophy and literary theory grapple with the suspension of disbelief, we have been able to observe the effect's operating in its natural habitat, and gained some context around exactly how it works. Touching upon Tolkien and others' takes on or arguments against suspension of disbelief has firmly embedded into our understanding the importance of textual stimuli and the creation of some form of 'second self' or imaginative space to contain the self. We are also faced with a problem, which is that the gamer 'self' is more of an awkward fit than the usual textual receiver. As chapter one showed, the factor of player skill is not only non-trivial in the way games are constructed and engaged with, in fact it is fundamental, part of the reason why Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) 'flow' theory has been so seized upon by theorists trying to make sense of games. Iser and Gerrig consistently place the reader at the receiving end of the textual process, the 'work' which she is doing all going into the receptive side of the textual chain. This problem of the 'skilled' reader is that in games this position is made more

awkward, since the player's skill affects more elements of the text than the reader's, which might be better defined as a form of 'capability', at least the way the term is deployed by Gerrig. Though Nell (1988, ch5-6) shows that reading speed is all too often correlated against a desire to read for pleasure, his readers did not have the same demands placed upon them as players do in videogames. The position from which the player's work is done is more central, motivating the text mechanically and often on levels including the direction or tone of narrative rather than solely acting as a receiver. In ludic terms, the 'skilled' reader is a problem because standard conceptions of the suspension of disbelief empowering this reception process are lost when the reader is already in a different position relative to the text. Coleridge himself voices similar worries in a part of his letter to Stuart that Ferri does not cite or place emphasis upon: "With the will, the comparing power is suspended, and without the comparing power any act of Judgement, whether affirmation or denial, is impossible." (Griggs, 1991, p.59) This problem will be returned to numerous times throughout this thesis, since suspension of disbelief, if it works in games, must work in a way which takes account of this repositioning of the 'skilled' reader. Analysis of games' textual construction in chapter three will begin to address this problem.

Much of the narrative theory and philosophy concerned with aesthetic responses, reader response or other elements of the suspension of disbelief obliquely references the unconscious or points to the psychological dimension of the reading/receiving process. Gerrig and Iser in particular, in their analyses of the comprehension and disbelief suspension processes necessarily turn to the psychological lexicon from time to time. Iser argues with Holland's (1968) early work while Gerrig supports his later arguments regarding the viewing of readers as active constructors, crafters of meaning rather than vessels to be filled with it. Looking more closely at the psychology of the suspension of disbelief in itself may go some way towards shoring up a definition. What faculties are we suspending exactly, and how do we go about this?

Psychological theory and philosophy – the problem of fundamental activity

In Ferri's (2007) due diligence on how the phrase 'suspension of disbelief' has been used, he turns to a psychobiography of Coleridge (Weissmann 1989) which connects suspension of disbelief with Ernst Kris's "regression in the service of the ego" (1952, p.47), whereby a

subject uses the irrational processes in the unconscious and id to achieve the aims of the rational ego. Kris puts forward a more solid connection between Aristotle's catharsis and Freud's psychoanalytic method, but focuses less upon the ends of catharsis and more upon an unpacking of the effect itself:

> The progress of psychoanalytic knowledge has opened the way for a better understanding of the cathartic effect…what Aristotle describes as the purging enables the ego to re-establish the control which is threatened by dammed-up instinctual demands. (Kris 1952, p.45)

This therefore represents a negotiation between Freud's (1991) pleasure and reality principles, elements of the reality principle being 'suspended' to gain the irrational 'poetic faith' of the unconscious. It also functions as a safety net of 'vicarious participation', Kris claiming that "safety in the aesthetic illusion protects from the danger in reality, even if both dangers should be identical." (Kris 1952, p.45) This in turn is a 'willing', conscious activation *of* the unconscious, which does contain all the elements of Coleridge's phrase, and which Ferri (2007 p.9) judges a "richer, more contemporary process.". The advantages of bringing the psychoanalytic lexicon to bear on suspension of disbelief are plain to see when Kris considers the need for a spark to somehow begin the suspension of disbelief act, or show that it is necessary. Discussing Edward Bullough's (1912) 'overdistance' and 'underdistance' terms, Kris concludes that the function of the suspension of disbelief in the ego is the neutralization of not all, but just enough of the natural "libidinal and aggressive energy" (Kris 1952, p.47) of the id. Participation with too much gusto , Bullough's 'underdistance', sees the id overwhelm the ego and prevent suspension, while disinterested observation or 'overdistance' sees no id function forthcoming and thus a failure of disbelief. Kris resolutely hands back the issue to aesthetic philosophy when acknowledging Coleridge, his two extremes correlating with the two ends of Gerrig's tightrope for the psychoanalytic discipline:

> At this point, however, we have in a different language approximately repeated what in other words has been said many a time. We are with Coleridge, who speaks of the

"willing suspension of disbelief". Safely balanced between [Bullough's] two extremes we gain pleasure from art.(ibid)

The psychoanalytic ripples of Coleridge's phrase are many and varied, and after beginning with Ferri's strong work on the phrase it is possible to cast the net a little wider and still see the same effect described from different angles. Frank DeFulgentis (2009) writes about using suspension of disbelief as practiced when interfacing with media texts as a way of reducing irrational cravings for those with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. Claiming he was using the effect as a helpful shorthand, he provides one of the most succinct and worthwhile definitions of the act:

> The writer provides a resemblance of truth and the reader agrees to suspend disbelief for the sake of entertainment. This allows the reader to engage him or herself in the story being told with an open mind. (Deflugentis 2009, P.26)

Explicitly therapeutic possibilities are the tip of the iceberg. Over a career fascinated by the nature of emotional response to literary texts, Norman Holland (1992) attempts to unpick first the psychology and then eventually the actual biology (2003, 2009) behind the suspension of disbelief. He comes to the conclusion that the effect's potency lies in readers' fundamental inactivity, backing up his theories with neurological science. These conclusions are looked at in more depth in chapter four, but his earlier (2003) definition is interesting too, dividing the suspension of disbelief up into three inhibitions and one disinhibition made by the reader in order to interface with the text. The three inhibitions comprise a ceasing of 'reality-testing', a loss of body awareness and a loss of awareness of the boundaries of the literary work with which we are engaging[27]. The disinhibition purchased through these three inhibitions is responding to the fiction as if it were real, a nascent take on poetic faith. On the other end of the scale, many elements of the suspension of disbelief are reflected in Csíkszentmihályi's (1990) 'flow states', born out of intense concentration on a single activity, yet Csíkszentmihályi's flow is far from Coleridge's concept because it is primarily concerned

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[27]Holland does not refer to games at all, but gives direct examples for theatre, literature and film.

with more general ideas of happiness, it lacks the sharp, textual edge that suspension of disbelief maintains.

A tonal difference between the literary and aesthetic theory and the psychological theory covering similar ground in this area is a focus on the emotive effect rather than the ramifications for texts and, implicitly, authors. It is important to keep in mind that at no point does Coleridge mention 'belief' in his definition whatsoever. The closest he comes is in the defining of the suspension of disbelief's effect as 'poetic faith', which connotes belief, but 'faith' is a very loaded word, especially in Coleridge's historical context. A psychoanalytic questioning of the suspension of disbelief would more likely be 'why do people cry at movies?' than 'how do readers lose themselves in books?'. The emotional angle of the 'belief' created through 'poetic faith' tends to draw psychoanalytic critics when they write directly about suspension of disbelief, Kris in particular sees the chief benefit of the aesthetic illusion as a freedom from guilt. This connects back to longstanding debates about the nature and purpose of belief itself. Cartesian philosophy regarding belief being a two stage process preceded by understanding clashes with Spinozan ideas which conflate the two acts, asserting that we believe everything we perceive until another faculty questions its veracity. Daniel Gilbert et al summarise the situation effectively in a paper which lines up evidence in support of the Spinozan theory:

> People do have the power to assent, to reject, and to suspend their judgment, but only after they have believed the information to which they have been exposed. For Descartes (1644/1984) , being sceptical meant understanding an idea but not taking the second step of believing it unless evidence justified taking that step. For Spinoza, being sceptical meant taking a second step backward (unbelieving) to correct for the uncontrollable tendency to take a first step forward (believing). Both philosophers realized that achieving true beliefs required that one subvert the natural inclinations of one's own mind; for Descartes this subversion was proactive, whereas for Spinoza it was retroactive. (Gilbert et al 1993, p.19)

Coleridge was aware of this debate, and the figure of the dreamer he creates as well as his privileging the suspension of disbelief as core to the interpretative act can be read as a

defence of the Spinozan approach against the Cartesian. Coleridge certainly wants his readers to *want* to believe, even if he is uncertain of their ability to accomplish this. However, the actual model which he puts forward of act followed by effect seems to conform more to the Cartesian school of thought, whereby readers are somehow able to dissect a text prior to believing or disbelieving it. Kris's (1952) explanation of how consciousness balances between overdistance and underdistance can, when considered alongside Gerrig's tightrope allow for the model to accord with the Spinozan view. Gerrig (1993) does something like this when he deploys the Spinozan approach via Gilbert (1991) to support his revision of the suspension of disbelief act, switching the 'will' element of the phrase to refer to a checking of the self after undergoing total belief in the comprehension process. Gerrig's reconstitution of the phrase is 'willing construction of disbelief'; we first believe, and then we disbelieve. Although at first glance Coleridge's original formulation appears to include the latitude to support this restructuring, it can also be read as unnecessary, sidestepping the need for this kind of retuning since it is seeking out not belief itself but rather poetic faith, and faith is anything but belief. This eventually finds conclusive form in Slavoj Žižek's 'ideological fantasy', described when he cites Marx and questions peoples' acceptance of particular forms of exploitation or 'false consciousness' which mask themselves as freedom, seeing a kind of suspension of disbelief at work:

> They know very well how things really are, but still they are doing it as if they did not know. The illusion is therefore double: it consists in overlooking the illusion which is structuring our real, effective relation to reality. And this overlooked, unconscious illusion is what may be called the *ideological fantasy*. (Žižek 1989 p.32-33)

This has taken us quite some way from texts. To return to psychoanalysis, the discipline's development has also brought with it more considerations of the suspension of disbelief. Lacan (1973) extrapolates part of why discussing suspension of disbelief, or shining a light upon it can be so difficult in his reading of the Orpheus myth and definition of the power of mimetic fiction, perhaps bringing a different angle on what is actually being suspended which may help realign Gerrig with Coleridge. For Lacan, the process of interfacing with a work of art involves the artist's eye controlling the spectator's gaze. However, the artist's eye is itself 'veiled' or concealed. The artist's eye, their perspective on the work of art which

contributed to its creation is repeatedly referred to as a 'stain' upon the art itself, something which cannot be cleaned away or forgotten. The way around this 'stain', and Lacan's interpretation of the suspension of disbelief, is that the art proves sufficient lure to cause a laying down of the spectator's gaze:

> The painter gives something to the person who must stand in front of his painting which, in part, at least, of the painting might be summed up thus: *You want to see? Well, take a look at this!* He gives something for the eye to feed on, but he invites the person to whom this picture is presented to lay down his gaze there as one lays down one's weapons. This is the pacifying, apollonian effect of painting. Something is not given so much to the gaze as to the eye, something that involves the abandonment, the *laying down* of the gaze. (Lacan 1973 p.101)

The abandonment of the gaze is the point in the process which is reflected in the suspension of disbelief act, and its pacifying effects target the spectator's eye rather than his gaze. The eye to Lacan represents the biological vehicle of vision as well as the self, while the gaze represents more than just the eye enabled with the critical faculties that so worried Coleridge in his letter to Stuart. Bound up with his concept of the mirror stage, the gaze to Lacan is a state of reciprocal self-conscious anxiety; the knowledge that one is the object of gaze is part of what socialises us according to Lacan, and the gaze belongs to its object rather than any particular instigator. It is important to remember that the eye and gaze are fundamentally part of the same person. The attitude of the painter in this citation reflects much of the attitude Coleridge takes in his preface to *Kubla Khan*, inviting explicitly the reader to lay down their critical, socialised, incredulous arms, their gaze relative to him, by providing for the, in this case reading, eye. Lacan's take not only reminds us that the suspension of disbelief process is divided into the act (willing suspension or laying down of the gaze) and the effect (poetic faith or pacifying) but also that it is constantly contractual. It is only through an agreement between artist and subject that the 'stain' of composition can be ignored in favour of, and through, the reconstructed lure. Lacan puts forward the idea that a set of individual rules are established to govern the selective inattention to markers of authorship and of their own context. Breaking down the suspension of disbelief in this way starts to show what it is that this thesis is really looking for, an attempt to define and

detail some of the commonalities between these created rules for games. Lacan's description of the process differs from Iser's in its focusing upon the emotive quality of the suspension of the critical faculty rather than its knock-on effects upon comprehension or the reading process. While Iser creates an almost defensive, enabling second self for the purposes of an aspirational suspension of disbelief, Lacan's suspension of disbelief leaves the reader defenceless as the necessary price to pay for opening up to the true potential of that which is put forward by the artist. However, Lacan's subject is also in control, a true Spinozan believer acting as if hampered like a Cartesian, governed by the set of rules.

This brief tour through psychoanalytic theory and reader response theory has lent some substance to the terms of Coleridge's phrase. Focusing in on it individually has allowed us to connect suspension of disbelief's component elements with detailed ideas regarding the mental effects that constitute the acts described. Behind 'willing' we see Coleridge's own angst about his readership as well as Kris' sparking. 'Disbelief' unravels into Lacan's reconstructed lure, and the various concepts of belief or the unconscious and finally, 'poetic faith' stands firm against Gerrig's attacks grounded in psychological theory.

Our definition is now beginning to take shape. We have the method, through Gerrig and Iser, and the underpinnings which allow for it through the psychoanalytic critics. We also find ourselves faced with a second problem: Holland (2003) seems the most fervent of the psychoanalytic critics to champion the subtractive idea that it is actually a lack of other activity which allows us to suspend our disbelief:

> Now what is happening as we are absorbed in a movie or play or book? *We are not planning to move.* As soon as we do plan to move, to get up and fetch a glass of wine or to find the buttery part of the popcorn or turn to our neighbor, we lose our concentration. We are no longer at one with the book or drama, we are no longer rapt, absorbed, taken in... We have broken the willing suspension of disbelief. (Holland, 2003)

Broadly we can see support in the positions of others cited so far for the possibility of a suspension of disbelief extending from other media into games. Yet Holland's position and the fundamental 'activity' which games require of players stands in opposition to this. In

addition, it corresponds to another of the key features a proposed suspension of disbelief for games needs to account for, which we isolated in the previous chapter. Agency, the 'activity' allowed the player over other, more passive audiences is both a privilege and a responsibility; that responsibility is to motivate the text, and prevent it from becoming no more than dead code. But suspension of disbelief seems to sit much better with those more passive media partly since it makes many demands of its own of the reader, but also due to its tendency to overwhelm receivers, resulting in the 'loss of time' scenario often associated with the suspension of disbelief effect. This problem of fundamental activity will need to be enfolded into any eventual explanation of how suspension of disbelief functions in videogame environments.

Psychoanalysts often reach in turn into the domain of play theorists when discussing suspension of disbelief. Ferri (2007, p.8) cites Berger and Luckmann (1966), who call suspension of disbelief a form of 'playing on the part of adults'. The ideas of regression which Ferri led us to through Coleridge often cite play and specifically board-game or game play as a form of 'healthy regression'. Role-play too is a staple of the psychoanalytic critical arsenal as a part of its discourse on identity, and more of an object of study for the play theorist. When we play, we activate a whole slew of subconscious elements which we have differing degrees of control over. This is partly why play theorists themselves often reach for the bedrock of psychoanalysis, but it rarely comes up in literature on games in games studies.   Moving on to look specifically at how some play theorists have approached the problem of suspension of disbelief will help to sharpen our working definition, especially considering that we wish to go on to deploy it in the arena of digital games.

Play theory and games – the problem of dissonance.

Before looking at more practical dimensions of the evolution of suspension of disbelief, let us return to games and definitions of games for a moment. The suspension of disbelief can be theorised as a kind of game the reader plays with himself, or with the text. Seeing it as a kind of role-play certainly puts it in the domain of those who have studied play. When Sutton Smith (1997 ch.8) touches upon ideas from the realm of play theory closest to the suspension of disbelief, it is when discussing rhetorics of the imaginary, defining these kinds of definitions of play along lines by now familiar when discussing Coleridge's phrase : "here

are all who believe that some kind of transformation is the most fundamental characteristic of play."(ibid p.127). He begins discussing this rhetoric from Coleridge's historical context, seeing that point in time as the originator for a new idea of what constitutes play, calling it the first time that play was put forward as dignified in western culture. The new meaning the Romantics gave to play, according to Sutton-smith, was to empower it through absorbing it into their definition of imagination, but also to lionise a particular aesthetically loaded form of play, the 'beauty of the Olympics' (ibid, p.131) over the 'irrational and bloody play of the roman gladiators' (ibid). Cruder forms of play were relegated to merely being 'fancy', while more complex forms retained the trappings of art, especially those forms practised by creators, playful artists. Their legacy is described as an imprinted connection on culture between art and play which persists into the present. This heavy connection between what Coleridge was defining when seeking out poetic faith from his readers certainly galvanises the case for a potential suspension of disbelief operating in the play-spaces offered by games. Coleridge's rhetorics suit the game-space and even more so the game designer extremely well, empowered as the designer is with levels of restrictive creative power that solidify much of what the romantic idealised figure of the artist comprised, and able to corral the play or 'raise the game' of those who encounter their work.

Another concept frequently connected not only with games but with the imagination in a play context is one which we have referenced before; the Magic Circle, a concept applied to games through the play philosopher Johann Huizinga (1955) and resurrected, almost redesigned, by Salen and Zimmerman's (2004) application of it to videogames. The magic circle is alluded to by Huizinga as part of a broader look at how play functions in physical spaces, but Salen and Zimmerman give it a new identity yet also keep it rooted in Huizinga's study:

> Beginning a game means entering into the magic circle. Players cross over this boundary to adopt the artificial behaviours and rituals of a game. During the game, the magic circle persists until the game concludes. Then the magic circle dissolves and players return to the ordinary world. (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, p.333)

The Magic circle here is in a difficult space between describing a physical location and a more conceptual region over which a game's rules hold sway. Describing it later as "the magic circle of the games design" (ibid, p.334), clarifies this somewhat, but still leaves the magic circle in an awkward spot, especially when it is held up against a potential simultaneous suspension of disbelief. One of the most useful elements of the magic circle concept is its bringing to the fore the ritual qualities of play as a means of setting up a virtual space. It places these ritual qualities alongside the more unformed kinds of playfulness, rationalising the latter through the lens of the former. Salen and Zimmerman discuss the difficulties of magic circles when applied to videogames, and observe that players need to 'properly perform the rituals of entry' to even begin to undertake playing them.

What we've encountered so far shares many similarities with Victor Turner's (1974) ideas regarding 'liminal play', play having a ritual role or connection existing somewhere between reality and unreality. Demarcation of this role is provided by the magic circle, as summed up by Salen and Zimmerman: "the formalized nature of the game making the magic circle explicit" (2004, p.99) This concept has been applied to videogames most effectively by David Myers (2009) in a paper which skirts around the gamer's suspension of disbelief but makes several interesting connections between the idea of liminality and the formal qualities of games, summing up as follows:

> Here I have described video game play as an experience in which the liminal – determined by a particular formal relationship among video game objects and values – is given a bodily component and cause that, in that process, viscerally confirms the play experience. *What seems to be* becomes, in the video game, *what is* and the psychophysical is there in asserted and confirmed as the physical. (Myers 2009, p.59)

The elements that are non-negotiable in games warp how they shape both play and the imaginary process. This is made more apparent in Myers' brutally honest definition of the play of video games:

> I would claim here that video games function rather as a means of anti-control, a conscious – or at least wilful – attempt to lose consciousness, to let the artifices of awareness and self slide in favour of a more direct and immediate engagement of body and mind. (Myers 2009,p.61)

Putting this definition forward in the context of this chapter does highlight several similarities between what Myers describes from a psychophysical standpoint which begins with play, and what Coleridge defined as the suspension of disbelief. Myers sets out his argument against an imagined ludic formalist, and this may not be the best approach, since the absolute reading of games as solely algorithmic spaces was not something even the most scathing ludologist voices ever advocated. Play and playfulness has sat close to ideas of reading and the literary ever since Aristotle, and the aesthetics of play in relation to the literary status of games are grappled with in chapter four. It is the dismissible playfulness of play, the lower forms that are dismissed by the Romantic imagination, and its application to videogames which underpins quite a lot of the issues ludologists have with narratologists who practice this dismissal, which is similar to pop art set against high art. Games alone, in the algorithmic forms Myers proposes, take up the same space as the roman gladiators set against the Olympians in Sutton-Smith's explanation of the Romantic imagination's re-definition of play above. In many ways it is this legacy which has held back the study of games as genuinely playful or playfully designed spaces, since the dismissal of play often incorporates the dismissal of games more broadly in favour of narrative forms, which can be seen to not do justice to the medium. Compelling as it is to see the suspension of disbelief itself as a kind of game, to do so would make it more difficult to define games as spaces where one could suspend disbelief, partly due to the issues of non-negotiable elements of the experience as described by Myers above. The inherent playfulness in the phrase is of its time, part of a sharpening of the creative potency of the author which it was designed and first deployed to defend. It is this dissonance between gameplay and narrative which characterises the medium of the video game at present, and inspired this thesis. The persistent problem of dissonance is the third major issue that we are faced with. How can games, dissonant spaces where the boundaries, the places where gameplay and story, game and theme, algorithm and narrative structure, 'higher' and 'lower' perceived forms of play clash and scrape across one another, be conducive to the kind of imaginative enabling that usually characterises the suspension of disbelief? This is a big question that has hung over the field of games studies since its inception, and a definition of suspension of disbelief, followed by discussion of how it works differently in games, could help to approach answering it.

Conclusion

The various narrative, psychological and play theorists cited in this chapter often look to the future or outside of the media they have chosen to focus upon for other ways to explain the comprehension process that occurs when readers of any kind expose themselves to texts. They all also, to a greater or lesser extent, mention or imply games or gamer-like behaviour in their definitions of the process. Iser (1976) takes on Simon Lesser's (1962) views on the value of conflict as the primary motivator of art by highlighting the value of reader activity, and when he does this it seems to be the game-like elements of literary texts that motivates the approach:

> Only if the reader is involved in working out this solution, can there be a truly cathartic effect, for only participation – as opposed to mere contemplation – can bring the reader the hoped-for satisfaction, although Lesser and Richards would have us think otherwise (Iser 1976, p.48)

Lacan's ruled suspension of disbelief, as cited above, makes the most empowered sense when paired up with this participation, but only if the receiver of the text continues to act within the rules which bind their appreciation of that world and govern the setting aside of their gaze. Play theory is naturally closer to games, but strains around the magic circle concept begin to become apparent when it is contrasted with the idea of a suspension of disbelief occurring at the same time. Myers (2009) take on liminality's relevance to the magic circle begins a process which this thesis will continue, in chiselling out how the suspension of disbelief act can be reconciled with the concepts which underpin the magic circle, and the values that maintain it.

The suspension of disbelief is not simply thinking, nor believing that the action occurring on the screen is real, as Iser's approach to it has reminded us. Neither is it entering into the narrative trance of allowing any and all affordances to the storyteller, going to any length to allow for their medium to exceed its imaginative potential, as a cursory reading of Lacan's approach might imply. It is more specific than a simple 'leap of faith' and, in context,

broader than a 'toggle-theory'. In games it seems to be connected with the entry into the magic circle, but it is not as concerned with the limitations of that space as those who constructed the concept could be comfortable with. Rather it is a participatory response but not necessarily as formally as Gerrig defines one. The suspension of disbelief weaves worlds around characters in books in tune with the tone of the writing. The suspension of disbelief, rather than blanks or negations, flashes Mercutio's ghost into your mind and onto the stage when the actors' actions and Shakespeare's words cohere in act 3 scene 1 of *Romeo and Juliet*. The suspension of disbelief is the 'magic of cinema', within the predefined, blacked out cinematic space which leads to not running in fear from the train that's coming towards the screen. The suspension of disbelief is the glue that binds together the three radically different visual modes of *Final Fantasy VII* (Fig 04, page 42). The suspension of disbelief allows poetic metaphors and devices wings to fly but also creates the sky of possibilities for them to fly into. In short, our working definition of suspension of disbelief, which provides a foundation for the rest of this thesis is as follows: the act of suspending one's disbelief is the voluntary, temporary creation in response to textual stimuli of an imaginative space that transcends the text yet is constantly renewed through its progression.

This final working definition retains the original phrase's three core participles and builds upon Deflugentis'(2009) succinct explanation of the phrase cited above, as well as taking elements from Huizinga's (1955) definition of p*oesis*. The creation of the space is temporary and the act is voluntary, though susceptible to the kind of explicit and implicit prodding that Coleridge tried so hard to generate in his prefaced poems. The imaginative space transcending the text but retaining it as a focal point is arguably a form of poetic faith. The constant renewal makes reference to the process of inference drawing through schema, as the text goes on, as well as to the constant nature of the contract, as pointed out in Lacan. Part of why we cry at movies is because of suspension of disbelief, because we have allowed the characters to cross boundaries we normally reserve only for intimates. Part of why we laugh in the theatre is because of suspension of disbelief, because we're comfortably aware of the boundaries of the space but kid ourselves this isn't the case. We fill in the space on the map of Middle-earth with forests and deserts and misty mountains because on one level we have accepted the map as a transitional artefact imbued with the fiction of the world it is describing.

Now that the suspension of disbelief effect is more deeply defined, the other major question that needs answering is how and where to locate it. All the different kinds of theorists referred to in this chapter have focused on aspects of the reader/text entity in various media. When looking for factors that enable a suspension of disbelief, we should be aware of all that we can in the equation between text and reader. Jakobson's (1960) model of communication is a good place to start, but its limitations, and the limitations of a purely formalist approach are swiftly made apparent. While readers need to share codes, contexts and channels with authors in order to comprehend the communication, it is often a blurring or merging of these elements which results in the suspension of disbelief effect as well as other factors, such as the reader's awareness of genre conventions or 'skill' within the media above and beyond that which is necessary for comprehension. Thus, the exact location of the suspension of disbelief effect itself is not something that can be pinned down, but rather elements of all the different entities between the reader and the text can be observed to enhance or dissolve the suspension of disbelief effect. When trying to define these elements breaking the experience up into text creation, textual existence and text reception is as important as isolating reader, medium and text in the actual moment of reading itself, since texts can be authored specifically to manipulate the reader's suspension of disbelief effect.

Sometimes this authoring is implicit, an attempt to craft a world that holds together and could potentially be more than whatever a particular reading moment focuses upon, be it the gentle ticking over of life in *Middlemarch* (Elliot, 1874) , the semi-real/semi-virtual world in which *The Matrix*'s (Wachowski bros., 1999) action scenes occur or the alien-enslaved City 17 of *Half Life 2* (Valve, 2004). Other times the text is authored more explicitly to work with the reader's suspension of disbelief, as is the case both in grand science fiction or fantasy literature, with its array of lore and ancillary materials seeking to submerge the reader, and in dystopian fiction, which takes the opposite approach and grates along the suspension of disbelief line by riffing off of how potentially real its content might become. Our appraisal of Coleridge's phrase and diverse critical schools' takes on it has helped coalesce exactly what it is that we are seeking out, as well as galvanise the relevance of this old yet effective phrase to the new, dynamic media that we are focused upon. We have isolated several weak points in the theory surrounding suspension of disbelief which would

seem to exclude or problematise games, providing direction for further examination. These comprise three main problems: the problem of the 'skilled' reader, the problem of fundamental activity and the problem of dissonance. We have also begun to explore the connotations of games' need for a suspension of disbelief definition, and by making reference to games when discussing these, begun to illuminate games from potentially new or underused angles. The rest of this thesis will attempt to approach these three problems head on one by one, and remould them into elements of a suspension of disbelief description which works within ludic environments, keeping reference to the working definition that we have arrived at in this chapter. Looking at the problems in more depth as they relate to games will allow for studies of immersion, the and the fourth wall's reconstitution in games. The first problem, that of the 'skilled' reader, connects well with a deepening look specifically at the medium of the videogame and how it can be seen to encourage suspension of disbelief.

Chapter 3: What sets games apart?

Approaching the Problem of the Skilled Reader

This thesis puts forward the idea that the suspension of disbelief works differently in games compared to other media. It is also asking what it means to talk about our engagement with games in terms of the suspension of disbelief. Now that games' place as a separate media worthy of study has been defended and the notion of 'suspension of disbelief' refined regarding other media, it is possible to look more closely at games themselves. This chapter will focus on what sets games apart from other media with regard to the suspension of disbelief, building upon both the definition of suspension of disbelief arrived at in chapter two (page 87) and the characteristics of other medias' modes of engagement as discussed throughout that chapter. Specifically, this chapter will engage with how every different game constitutes a separate and unique articulation of game 'grammar', as well as examining how relevant the idea of immersion is to our understanding of the suspension of disbelief. The goal of this chapter's analysis is primarily to take on the first of the three problems with observing a suspension of disbelief effect in games which were outlined in chapter one, the 'problem of the 'skilled' reader', by looking at games' textual construction in context. The focus is on the construction and uses of grammar because it is the more general mode of engagement or, to use a term developed in the context of games' textual analysis (Carr 2006, King and Krzywinska 2002, Atkins 2003), 'reading' process of games that requires scrutiny. This scrutiny needs to happen prior to attempting to locate specific features which revise or complicate the suspension of disbelief within the actual process of gaming itself. Immersion as a concept could at first appear as being at odds with the idea of a suspension of disbelief; the word implies, and has indeed been used to reference a totality of engagement which would make the process redundant, or at least supersede it. However, immersion remains the closest thing to suspension of disbelief in games that has received large amounts of critical attention, and as such its use and definition relative to this thesis' ideas warrants scrutiny. The amount of critical focus on immersion has turned the term into something of a battleground, with multiple and potentially oppositional explanations of its meaning, some of which involve or depend upon interpretations of

suspension of disbelief. The first half of this chapter examines definitions of immersion, while the rest frames immersion around suspension of disbelief, in an attempt to clarify and solve the problem of the skilled reader, leading us closer to a conclusion regarding how suspension of disbelief works in games by overcoming this problem which we first located in chapter two (page 74).

The problem of the skilled reader emerged out of the previous chapter in observations of how general dismissals and assumptions of reader skill could broadly apply within other media, or other media could see the audience's 'skilfulness' levelling out over time as the medium became familiar. By contrast, the audience's skill with the medium, not just reading it but actively operating it becomes more apparent and harder to ignore in games. Gerrig (1998) correlated reader skill with an ease of suspension of disbelief, and cited Nell (1988), who argued that a text's 'playability' could encourage its being read for pleasure. Skill is core to games' mode of engagement (Surman, 2008) , as was summarised in chapter one (page 55), and this chapter seeks to show exactly how this shifted emphasis on skill through the mode of engagement with the medium of games reflects upon the suspension of disbelief. The different uses of game grammar making up individual game titles and the process of immersion make games stand out from other media. Both are the result of interactivity, the dimension which games encompass and other media types only involve minimally, to the extent of turning pages or following action by moving the body. As argued in chapter one, experimental texts from other media that incorporate interactivity into their forms generally tend to end up having more in common with games than with the remnants of their original form, 'choose your own adventure' style books being a case in point. Games, in their often unavoidably hybrid constructions incorporating elements of film, literature and performance imbue these other media types with this same emphasis on the interactive element trumping the mode of engagement. The game form becomes paramount, its cybernetic qualities usurp the way the text must be read, even when its scope is minor in comparison to the rest of the text. Some of the definitions of immersion and its relationship to interactivity seek to reinforce these opinions. Aarseth (1997 p.48) claims, tongue-in-cheek, that "to declare a system interactive is to endorse it with a magic power", referring more to critics' tendencies to fear or revere interactivity. However, something fundamental about a text does change when it is made interactive, and by

beginning to look at the game-reading experience specifically, and where it locates the suspension of disbelief, this chapter intends to get under the skin of this magic power. This will help us to take on the problem of the skilled reader, and see how players' differing levels of ability relative to the text as well as their position as simultaneously both an audience and a primary motivator can impact the way in which gamers suspend disbelief.

Different approaches to the grammar of games

Games are consumed in fundamentally different ways to other media types. The author, the player and the medium all have different constraints and freedoms, as is the case in any distinct media type, but the audience's or gamer's shift of role into motivator of the text rather than simple receiver evolves how they are able to consume it, placing the gamer several degrees closer to the creative core of the experience. This placement occurs through those elements of the form that make up our problems of the 'skilled' reader and of fundamental activity. Concerning the suspension of disbelief, the usual expectations and means of approaching a text must be thrown to the wind by an audience which is now expected to somehow enable textual progression entirely, rather than operate only the kind of reading or comprehensive skills which Gerrig and Nell were concerned with. Primarily aiming at a definition of games, Suits accounts for this expectation to a degree when he locates some properties of his definition in the player. The acceptance of rules in the light of their allowing for an activity to be a game is what Suits calls the 'lusory attitude', and makes most sense when contextualised alongside his entire working definition:

> To play a game is to attempt to achieve a specific state of affairs [prelusory goal], using only means permitted by rules [lusory means], where the rules prohibit use of more efficient in favour of less efficient means [constitutive rules], and where the rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity [lusory attitude]. (1978 p.54-55, parentheses as cited)

What Suits defines here as the 'lusory attitude' is absolutely required of the modern videogamer, although it may be felt less keenly due to the ease of access to game-spaces and gameplay that technology and genre/media familiarity breeds. Whether or not this requirement cements the suspension of disbelief and prevents it from being as 'willed' as it

is in other media is one of the questions approached in the next chapter. Every game is unique, comprised of selections and combinations from a larger grammar; a schema that needs to be observed, learned and if not mastered then at least worked with in order to bring about continuation. Learning the grammar, the rules, structure and so on an individual game has in unique combination is a development of literacy that happens to a greater or lesser extent with every game we play. The 'gamer', the *literate* player is, in many ways, the 'skilled' reader, but they may or may not also be a skilled player, since this literacy build-up does not occur in a vacuum.

Alongside the learning of this grammar, other elements of engagement are simultaneously occurring and have bearing on the 'reading', or 'learning to read' a game. Ivy Roberts describes players undertaking "strategies of defamiliarisation" (2009 pp.93)   when she cites Stephen Neale (1990): "This process requires viewers to first admit to the unbelievability of the alternative world and then submit to its autonomous laws and particular narrative logic." This stepping back and then diving into games characterises a central difference in their mode of engagement which occurs as we learn to master each separate text. Other concerns such as winning or losing the game are present, in fact they can overwhelm the reading-centric approach I have described so far, with games often being primarily seen as tests of skill or of efficiency. The aim of this section is to outline what comprises use of game grammar, in order to isolate what sort of framework the player is acting within. This will help consolidate how suspension of disbelief works differently in light of both the stage upon which the player is acting and the 'skill' required in order for them to act; examples from three games are used by way of illustration.

World of Goo (2D Boy, 2008) is a puzzle game where the player manipulates balls of sticky goo to build structures that traverse levels in order to reach the goal; a pipe which will suck up all the unused goo balls. The objective is to get as many goo balls into the goal as possible, meeting or exceeding a set target. The structures built out of goo are affected by gravity, wind and all the other unused goo balls rushing up and down them, constantly testing their stability. Levels are split up into five thematic 'chapters' and become more difficult as the game progresses. The challenge is to be as effective an architect as possible, finding ways to traverse complicated levels using limited resources. The only agency the

player has is the ability to stick, and sometimes unstick, balls of goo to and from one another. Eventually the player gains the ability to attract free-roaming goo balls to their cursor's position. Narrative functions as a reward for the completion of levels and chapters in the form of cut-scenes comprised of movies and text, as well as hints or storyline material scattered throughout the levels on signs, which are generally highlighted for the player to click on and read. The story can be regarded as a satirical cautionary tale about the increasing power of internet search companies.

Halo 3 is a first person shooter which is very much a genre piece designed for mass consumption. The player controls a character who fights enemies using a wide array of guns and vehicles. The objective is to get to the end of each level without being killed by the enemy. Players have an array of moves to use and potential paths to follow through the level, and the controls support various approaches to the challenge. Running, jumping, piloting vehicles, shooting and throwing grenades are the basic verbs the player has access to, with degrees of sophistication and finesse possible for each action. The level of challenge can be controlled through difficulty settings at the beginning of the game. Narrative follows the main character 'Master Chief' and his exploits in a war between humans and aliens. It is communicated alongside gameplay through radio chatter and set-piece scenes that occur during the levels, as well as via cut-scenes between levels or sections. The narrative has cinematic echoes, often utilising Hollywood blockbuster movie conventions.

Final Fantasy XII is a Japanese role-playing-game which is both true to its roots and designedly accessible. The player is embodied in one character but has control over a cast of characters in a party when fighting off monsters. The objective is to explore the world to reveal the narrative, and overcome various battles and bosses in the way. The game is divided into an exploration game which generally takes place in cities where residents can be interacted with and equipment bought, and a battle game where the party takes on enemies in the field. Characters' agency increases over the course of the game, directed by the player. Controls are moves selected from menus which expand as characters grow, and can be pre-assigned for given situations. Moving, choosing dialogue options and selecting these commands, sometimes speedily in reaction to moves made by the enemy, are the primary verbs of the game. The story resembles a literary epic, covering several journeys around a world populated with diverse characters. The core of the story concerns political

machinations and power struggles alongside wars and racial strife. Plot exposition functions as a reward for killing some bosses in the form of CGI cut-scenes. Scenes where the player has no control over the game apart from reading or listening to the dialogue between characters also occur frequently. Unlike *Halo 3* it is not part of a continuing *Final Fantasy* narrative, but does share many textual features, both in terms of gameplay and narrative, with other games in the series.

Blandly stating the facts of each game and how it is constituted in this fashion is an attempt to present them all on a level playing field as well as to isolate their key gameplay and narrative features with a view to understanding what makes up their use of game grammar. All three games use narrative, and each also has a unique gameplay style. Gameplay can be well understood through the concept of a gameplay gestalt which, as Lindley describes it, comprises "perceptual, cognitive and motor effort"(2002, p.6) deployed via "learning to interact in a way that supports progress given a usable subset of the rules."(ibid, p.4) The three games all also have rules that govern how the world works but remain invisible to players. The player doesn't need to know exactly how the physics operate in *World of Goo*, just realise that they are roughly analogous to real physics. The player doesn't need to know exactly how hits are scored or how far a given gun is able to fire before the bullet disappears in *Halo 3*, they just need to get a 'feel' for the weapons. Unless they are hunting something specific they don't need to know how the monsters 'spawn' or appear in *Final Fantasy XII*, but this variable is important to the game since it could dramatically affect the difficulty of a particular set of encounters. These invisible rules are also made contextually visible in no-go areas. The playfield is bounded off in *World of Goo* even when it looks like the player could potentially build in that direction, *Halo 3*'s Master Chief is funnelled along through levels that imply a grander battle going on around him, but only allow 'real' access to a subset of that action. In *Final Fantasy XII* invisible walls sometimes appear, blocking progress to an area that cannot be entered at that point in the narrative or even at all. It is important to emphasise just how bounded off and constrained these gamescapes actually are, since their narratives all hint at or aspire to greater scope than the rules and contexts allow for.

The games make a point of marketing themselves using both gameplay and narrative features as 'hooks'(Howland, 2002), leading to descriptions on the box far from the more objective explanations above. This is more than just a sales pitch, one-upmanship over the

competition, it actually hints at how games are constructed as synthesis of gameplay and story. While the boxes tout the angle each particular game takes on narrative or gameplay, all try to sell both features of the experience, gameplay and narrative. This is not because game designers, particularly those behind *World of Goo* and *Halo 3* see themselves as directly comparable to storytellers of any particular stripe or media, but rather because context is necessary in order to explain what is fundamentally a very personal and moment-by-moment *lived* experience, as well as one which enables the suspension of disbelief effect through textual stimuli. This contextualising of the gameplay experience through narrative again hints at a symbiotic relationship between the two, which is characterised by the third problem we isolated in the previous chapter when discussing games and theatre; the problem of dissonance which occurs when these two elements disassociate and flare up. In fact this symbiotic relationship between game rules and those rules' contexts is absolute insofar as the player is concerned. Objects presented onscreen absolutely must be made up of a set of rules which dictate what they are capable of doing in addition to contextual information which explicates some, or all of these properties to the player. This is fundamentally true for any object presented to the player, and functionally true of many of the invisible rules that make up the rest of the game world, in that their existence only really matters when it has an affect on something involving the player. Written in all manner of different programming codes and facilitated through various technologies, the programmed framework of games is designedly almost completely invisible, and even when it becomes visible, such as in the ability to modify characters' statistics or control their independent artificial intelligence (henceforth, AI) behaviours in *Final Fantasy XII* it is via a user-friendly and contextually relevant interface. This leads to the odd situation of shops in-game selling 'gambits', scraps of AI code that the player can chain together and set up in order to facilitate easier combat, and other characters discussing 'gambits' as if they were battle tactics, all coherent within the lexicon and register of the game world. A secret area in *World of Goo* makes light of the invisible rules that make up the goo ball object by presenting the actual equation diagram that dictates its function as a primitive cave painting. The objects that make up the game and are presented to the player are created and bounded by rules but presented through graphics or other kinds of contextual signifiers.

These contextual signifiers, informed by the particular grammatical construction of the world, make up some of the 'textual stimuli' part of our working definition[28] as well as all the other elements of the text that would appear in-play to a non-gaming observer, helping to create the context that will allow for a uniquely ludic suspension of disbelief. This is a structural framework which is imported from linguistics and has been usefully leveraged in other discussions of game construction (Crawford, 2003 , Brown and Krzywinska, 2009) but not made use of before to discuss suspension of disbelief.
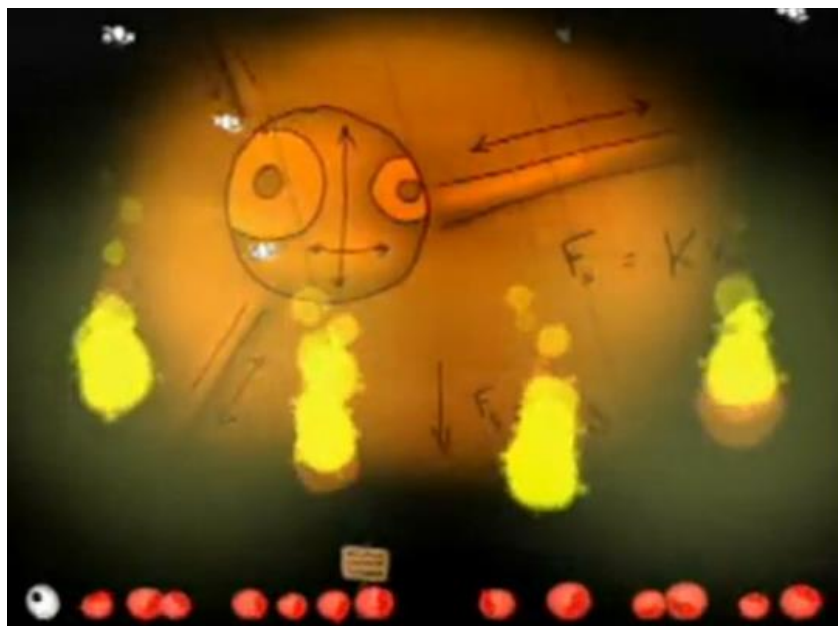
Fig .05 *Cave Paintings describe the invisible rules by which*

World of Goo *operates.*

But since gameplay and narrative are so naturally interleaved, why keep them apart for the purposes of criticism? The most expedient reason is allowing for critical explanation at all. In many ways in order to understand the suspension of disbelief properly, this disconnecting is necessary due to the uniquely experiential quality of gameplay and the position of its receiver the player, somewhere in the midst of the text yet simultaneously outside of it. Once these two sides are taken apart, analytical depth becomes visible on both sides when we consider the reflections and ramifications each affords. In order to analyse the affect of, say, taking a path through a level in *World of Goo*, fighting an online match in *Halo 3* or

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[28] This, and future references to the 'working definition' are referencing the definition which made up the conclusion to chapter two. (Page 87)

negotiating a sub-quest in *Final Fantasy XII* what begins as a time-bounded lived experience needs to be frozen and captured on the page. *In medias res* the features cohere and my tower of goo collapses to make a bridge just as I planned, my teammate crashes the vehicle I was gunning leading to our team losing the match or I help out the damsel in distress for a small reward. However in order to explain how this happened the only options are either a naive explanation that only takes into account gameplay (how a sequence of buttons was input to yield the outcomes described, failing to take into account the contexts of the actions taken) or a naive storytelling session (how the events unfolded due to, or in spite of, player input, ignoring the reality of the input itself). Getting in any closer requires snapping apart gameplay and narrative features to explain the totality of the experience. Unravelling the tightly wound and interconnected features leads to balanced explanations that take account of both how the gameplay session unfolded and how contextual elements, or perhaps storytelling, functioned to maintain it. Another convincing reason for the forced separation of gameplay and narrative is that their interplay is more accessible when it can really be observed how one acts upon the other and the consequences.

Gameplay within grammar

Some of this interplay in terms of gameplay elements involves the capabilities of everything the player has access to or will be presented with in the game. In addition it comes about through how the player is able to control these elements. Isolating the components of agency; their particulars, their potential and their operation is as important to gameplay as isolating the components of the space in which the agency operates; its scope or extent, the features of its terrain and their plasticity relative to agency, and what paths exist to traverse this terrain for the purposes of play. What is controlled comprises of what the controls in question can accomplish, and this depends on the kinds of numerical increments, distances or sizes that make up the mainstay of the game. This helps define much of a game's own specific diegesis, and is therefore geared by different considerations to that of most fictions which are not gamic. In *World of Goo* some of these distances are made explicit through the level design and others through the distance it is possible to place one goo ball from another with them still sticking together. In *Halo 3* distances are generally considered as ranges; how far can a particular gun or class of gun shoot, how deep does water need to be to dismount riders from vehicles, how far up someone could potentially be thrown by an

explosion and still be able to play on. *Final Fantasy XII* deals with terrain from small scale rooms in houses to large zones that link together cities and dungeons, but the stride length of the main character and his walking/running speeds remain constant, as does the distance one needs to be at in order to target an enemy in the field. Damage numbers and other kinds of balancing effects are also in play here, explicitly in *Final Fantasy XII* since it uses numbers to demonstrate how much damage is being done, and pools of health which have a numerical value and can be depleted. The amount of damage a weapon does and how much damage Master Chief can absorb in a set amount of time before losing the game in *Halo 3* are not explicitly stated, but demonstrated in other ways to the player. In *World of Goo* these concerns are more about how many goo balls can be utilised to build structures within a given level and how many must remain for the completion criteria to be achieved.

Isolating the variables the player has control over within these topographical frameworks is another element of gameplay in a use of grammar. Building into this in our three examples, we can start to see some interpretative pathways become closed off, while others are highlighted. In *World of Goo* players control a cursor which can interact only with a few of the elements on screen. Initially this comprises goo balls alone, but eventually some terrain elements and the movements of other goo balls come into its scope. Players' management of the variables on offer to them makes up gameplay both here and in the other two games. In *Halo 3* players can move around, collect and select weapons and fire them as well as use a close range attack and throw grenades. The way they manage these abilities, the 'skill' component, determines between success and failure. Tapping the grenade button results in dropping the grenade at your feet and is thus generally less conducive to winning than throwing them at the enemy by angling the screen and holding the button down. *Final Fantasy XII* sometimes allows players to control only a single character, Vaan, in cities, but in battles allows control of all the characters via what is a comparably complex and layered system of AI management. The characters' capabilities grow over time as does the complexity of 'gambits', and gradually more mastery of the system is assumed in the design of encounters the player must face to progress. The gameplay experience's base complexity, or 'difficulty level', implying the degrees of skill required to allow successful engagement with the text is set by the game design when the potential parameters for these move-sets are laid out.

As well as the individual controls, the use of grammar is also characterised by interplay or combinations between controls. This makes up another element of gameplay that needs must be unique to each individual game. Figuring out how controls work in tandem or when chained together can generate what may be a strategy or combination of controls more useful than either of them alone. Whether combinations of controls should be considered separate controls in their own right is arguable from game to game, for example the case for considering 'powersliding' around corners in racing games as a separate 'strategic' control to either of the two 'tactical' braking or steering controls that make up powersliding. Figuring out how controls and techniques link up to affect the game and how these links work is paramount to effective, enjoyable gameplay, from the freeform to the structured. It is simply accessing the full agency available at any given point in time. In games these controls, particularly those of the strategic level may well create their own rhythm or pace, especially when combined with level designs and goal locations by the developer. This leads to recommended styles of play, the 'racing line' racing game control combinations follow perfectly to get the lowest lap times. Equating this pace or rhythm with the contextual elements associated to rule sets and controls is a basic principle of simulation and can lead to the button-mashing of *Track and Field* (Konami, 1992) simulating running down a track or the multi-control complexity of flight simulators which may have a basis in reality, and the extreme complexity of mech-command game *Steel Battalion* (Capcom, 2002) which decidedly does not. Connecting control flows with context has significant impact on the player's identification with the game world. The usual pattern recognition elements which enable effective gameplay are magnified through the lens of strategic controls and then again through applied contexts and designs to create rhythms and tempos of gameplay read by the gamer. Growing familiarity with these billowing textual stimuli allows for the gamer to think beyond their mere articulation, encouraged not only to master these chains of mechanics but also to see them as potentially meaningful units by the potential of further strategic possibilities. By the same token, the potential shock of innovation or intervention within these fast-establishing strategies is also a possibility. The logic of the grammar used will build up into this rhythmic, almost natural flow of gameplay around the player, whose access to the game's verbs and agency becomes increasingly more familiar with repetition.

Understanding the full articulation potential of controls rather than just their basic use is an equally important facet of gameplay which impacts both suspension of disbelief and the logic of the game's internal grammatical code, since agency is only as valuable as its extent within the game world. In *World of Goo* this consists of working out the absolute longest length two goo balls can be placed apart yet still stick together, maximising the efficiency of a link in the structures you build. In *Halo 3* the actual range of the powerful 'melee' control, which does large amounts of damage is surprising, and learning this 'personal space' range can make combat much easier. In *Final Fantasy XII* articulation of controls is more staid since most controls involve making selections from menus, but as more scope is added to the selections available then opportunities to maximise characters' experience gain or time in the field before they need to restock on supplies become more apparent. Using different ranks of particular spells, especially healing spells, can create the same effect for lower cost.

The controls, world and agency potentials are then overlaid to form the gameplay experience where the player navigates and interacts with the world using the agency potential afforded by the controls. All of these elements are unique to games, all need to be legislated for or dealt with in some way if we are to reconcile suspension of disbelief to the medium. An approach to the use of game grammar is now recognisable, and we can see from what makes it up that it needs must be, to some extent, unique to each game. Learning how to navigate through control use can be a fundamental core of the game, as is the case in *World of Goo* where traversal is the key gameplay challenge, or very simple as in *Final Fantasy XII* where navigation around the world comes second to internal navigation of the range of spells and abilities available during combat. Of course, the location of goals or objectives pre-set by the game designers, if any, is the other component of navigating what is constantly to some degree a landscape contrived around the player's controls and agency potentials. These goals can be explicit, as is the case in *World of Goo* where each level's goal is a small pipe the player builds towards, or implied by the world design and directed by the narrative as in *Halo 3*, where mission objectives shift and change in reaction to events, and are sometimes relegated to merely surviving the next onslaught. Goals come from both the system and the story in *Final Fantasy XII*. While plots in the narrative provide both pressing and trivial objectives from defeating the main villain through to helping out secondary characters with dilemmas, the game's levelling system is presented as a giant grid

where points can be spent to fill in empty slots and develop characters, functioning as an implicit goal since it can potentially be filled in its entirety. Arguably the achievement systems built into *Halo 3* and *World of Goo* could be said to be accomplishing something similar as well as offering additional reward feedback.

 The use of grammar is also characterised by boundaries, and these too must be reconciled with narrative and suspension of disbelief. Regardless of how abstract a game seems, the videogame form demands endpoints which enclose the experience. The boundaries of the game world, and there must always be boundaries, are delineated in different ways, described usefully as 'hard' and 'soft' boundaries by King and Krzywinska (2006, p.82). *World of Goo* levels generally just stop the mouse from scrolling any further even if it looks like the landscape continues in that direction, or set the playfield underground with walls. Sometimes, most often in the set-piece levels that end each chapter, the player is rewarded for climbing goo up what seems at first like a dead end, only to have the playfield extend to reveal the narrative payoff once the journey is completed. Spatial boundaries are tied into narrative contexts more coherently and extensively in the other two games. In *Halo 3* battlefield activity such as explosions, rock slides or incoming troops block off potential paths and channel the Master Chief down a pre-designed gauntlet that at least appears to be formed on the spur of the moment. The same is true at a more sedate pace dictated by both the player and the narrative of *Final Fantasy XII*. The landscape is sometimes restricted by narrative events or directly shaped by them, but more often than not unlocks by virtue of characters increasing in level and being able to take on tougher monsters. The difference is that exploring amidst available landscapes is encouraged by the pacing of *Final Fantasy XII* but discouraged in the *Halo 3* example. Thus, while grand narrative momentum such as the arrival of an alien ship knocking down a canyon wall in *Halo 3* or a previously impassable mountain range opening up after reaching a turning point in *Final Fantasy XII*'s story is able to open and close off available gamespaces, this tends to be heavily signalled.

The interplay of all the above variables and, inevitably, several others not touched upon make up the internal process of gameplay by the player, itself pleasurable and divorced from the actual input procedure whereby the player asserts control. It is testament to how difficult it is to fully deconstruct a gaming experience that the above examples contain amounts of contextual material irrelevant to the gameplay action they describe. The core

action of all three games is fundamentally divorced from their narratives and contexts to a greater or lesser degree. The contexts of *World of Goo* cohere around the physics based gameplay to increase its potency while at the other end of the scale the staid menu-based gameplay of *Final Fantasy XII* can often seem at odds with the more fast paced moments of its narrative. Simultaneously its scope can chime more with the statistic selection aspect of its gameplay. *Halo 3*'s running and gunning gameplay to some extent dictates its narrative, designed to facilitate the various possibilities opened up by what is at its heart a multiplayer combat game.

Games' use of grammar and narrative

We can see from the identification of the use of game grammar above that storytelling has a negotiated relationship with a lot of different parameters of every bespoke game experience. Narrative itself relates to the gameplay experience at a higher level better characterised through the problem of dissonance, but elements of narrative shape the use of grammar and become relevant to the problem of the skilled reader when they are designedly interactive. Often this is expressed by offering the player degrees of narrative choice or a semblance of control over the path the story takes. While 'core' contexts remain static as part of the narrative side of a game's use of grammar, choices intended to be taken as meaningful can exist within games and are often touted as a major feature. Most commonplace are bifurcating narratives that allow the selection of different paths to different incarnations of roughly the same goal. *Fable* (Lionhead, 2004) and *Planescape: Torment* (Black Isle, 1999) are examples, as is the narrative of *Deus Ex*, which contorts and revolves around many player actions, attempting to avoid limiting their agency as much as possible, but still landing them in the same place eventually. The gameplay throughout *Deus Ex* mirrors the ending of an earlier first-person shooter with narrative ambition, *Half-Life*. After the final boss of *Half-Life* is dispatched, the screen blacks out to be replaced with a slow-moving train, a comforting womb-like space from the game's introduction where agency, while possible, was heavily constrained. Instead of the research facility of the introduction, the train is journeying through a star field, as a mysterious figure, glimpsed dozens of times throughout the many levels that have led the player to this point, asks them to make a stark decision. The 'G-man' offers player-character Gordon Freeman a choice between serving him and "a battle you have no chance of winning." Delivering this line, he

gestures to the train door which slides open. Walking through it and defying the G-man leads to a sea of enemies inevitably overwhelming the player. Staying on the train gives the canonical ending, where Freeman is pressed into the G-man's service. This game-based version of Hobson's Choice, also executed with more finesse in *Deus Ex* is both commonplace and inevitable in games with narrative. It exposes narrative's dependent position in the gaming experience, making evident how its level of importance relative to grammar use is in flux. The player is allowed to make the choice, but its meaning is constrained by context fundamental to the medium. These are the narrative equivalents of invisible walls. A recent indie videogame, *Sleep is Death* (Jason Rohrer, 2010) is set up to counter this position by reframing the communication of narrative as a two-player game. Player one controls a character with free agency to interact with any item they can see in any way that they can communicate, or make their character speak. Meanwhile player two; the storyteller or 'controller' responds to the moves and decisions the character makes by changing the scene or writing dialogue on-the-fly, empowering the single-player experience much in the same manner as a D&D or *Neverwinter Nights* (Bioware, 2002) gamesmaster. The gaming element is injected into the experience by limiting the amount of time available for each response to 30 seconds, resulting in a game of improvised storytelling informed, for good or ill, by the contextual limitations prevalent in modern single-player videogames. As well as throwing into light the constraints placed upon narrative through meaningful choices in single-player games, *Sleep is Death* reminds us that the multiplayer videogame throws up several challenges that need to be addressed by any redefinition of suspension of disbelief in the context of games, since multiple imaginations and the social framework which they can generate, often referred to as a 'metagame', certainly impacts their reception. The conclusions drawn on suspension of disbelief in the medium should therefore be borne out in multiplayer examples as well as single player ones. [29]

Whether or not meaningful choices exist or are interpreted as such within a given game, narrative remains tied to gameplay through its contextualising of rules and control mechanisms. Gameplay requires contexts in order to function, to make its presence felt. As far as the role of narrative is concerned, it is the applicability of narrative features rooted in other media to contextually mediated gameplay that players attempt to decode and, once

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[29] This test is applied to the solutions to the three problems during the final conclusions section of this thesis.

again, varies with each individual game. The narrative elements of a game's use of grammar first contextualise rules and then assert narrative around these contexts, generally to a preconceived plot that is drip-fed to the player. Crucially, the first engagement with narrative elements, even those far removed from elements of the use of game grammar, such as cut-scenes, are related to by the player through the lens of that grammar usage, which necessarily alters how they are regarded. Hence cut-scenes can continue to exist as a more robust narrative once actions are contextualised, but only on the terms of the game. It is this narrative reconstructed through contextualisation which means games are harder to align to the blunted instruments of previous definitions of suspension of disbelief, which were designed in the main to fit forms where narrative holds a primacy which is not afforded it in these spaces.

Chapter one of this thesis established that narrative operates as a feature to draw players into games and can often run practically independently of gameplay, as in the case of all three of the example games, each of which contain opportunities for dialogue and direction within the narrative but railroad the player down the same plot path. Nothing the player can do alters the plot of any of the games, and not even in examples of the most open games such as *Space Invaders* (Taito 1978) or *Elite* (David Braben, 1984) can 'core' contexts be edited or dramatically altered. This connection comes about as result of the more general equating of 'narrative' and 'contextual markers' in this analysis, and is important to the suspension of disbelief since there needs to be something concrete or static to potentially believe in, making up the 'textual stimuli' element of the working definition arrived at in chapter two. Context and narrative can be equated in this fashion since this thesis defines narrative as the way that the story is told, closer to the field of intention than more closed, literary-focused definitions. Regardless of the degree of imposed story or designed settings, we make narrative connections when we engage with these texts.

Aarseth re-imagines the game-sign in his semiotic analyses of games, crucially affirming its difference through a focus on its existence within two 'material levels' of the coded and the expressive:

> In the cybernetic sign transformation, however, the relationship [between the two levels] might be termed *arbitrary* because the internal, coded level can only be fully

experienced by way of the external, expressive level…both are equally intrinsic, as opposed to the extrinsic status of a performance of a play vis-à-vis the play script. (1997 p.99)

Once again textual stimuli are awkward customers because they are themselves existing in the dyadic fashion which Aarseth (ibid, ch.2) highlights when he deconstructs adventure games. Removing the contextual markers, be they goo balls, guns or spell names from the previous section's examples would render gameplay impossible, at least in its present form. Meanings could be changed, but this would necessitate a new coherence, a new use of grammar, a different game form to be read.

Aarseth makes this connection, but does not stress the narrative dimension. In simplistic examples such as those mentioned in the previous section, the varying of the contextual would have little effect, but within more complex videogames the contextual signs cohere into systems which, if some signs were varied, run the risk of collapse. Videogames with storytelling ambitions of any sort empower contexts. This is principally the case in those games which would fall under Juul's (2005 p.130-133) definitions of coherent and incoherent world games, but potentially others too filter their rules and mechanics through an extra level of narrative coherency.   This dimension builds an extra element of coherent narrative meaning into Alexander Galloway's definition of game-reading as the interpretation of an 'allegorithm':

> The activity of gaming, which, as I've stressed over and over, only ever comes into being when the game is actually played, is an *undivided* act wherein meaning and doing transpire in the same gamic gesture. (2006, p.104)

This definition itself builds upon Lev Manovich's (2001, p.222-223) earlier definition of the game's algorithm representing a 'hidden logic' that the player must engage with. When Arsenault and Perron, occupied in a similar endeavour, arrive at the issue of narrative coherency, they present the idea of the act of gaming being made up of gameplay and narrative, although they first isolate gameplay alone as 'the most important feature of video games':

While there exist abstract or non-narrative video games…most games rely on some kind of narrative, ranging from a basic framing narrative (Tetris Worlds, Blue Planet software, 2001) to a rich and complex plot (Star Wars: KOTOR, Bioware, 2003). (2009 p.116)

The responsibility of this reliance, limiting much potential gameplay, is engineered into Arsenault and Perron's 'magic cycle' gameplay model but repeatedly denied by the authors, who insist:

The spirals' [of gameplay, narrative and hermeneutics] relationship to each other is one of *inclusion*: the gameplay leads to the unfolding of the narrative, and together the gameplay and the narrative can make possible some sort of interpretation (Ibid, pp.117, my italics)

The magic cycle model's aversion to empowering narrative is the result of attempts not to conflate interpretation with narrative, put forward through their rebuttal of Murray's (1998) reading of *Tetris*: "It is also possible to play *Super Mario Bros* (Nintendo, 1985) just for fun, and not see there a metaphor for being high on drugs" (ibid). Looking at games as articulations of game grammar in which gameplay can remould the relationship to narrative refocuses attention on the text rather than on the potentially endless interpretative process, and gives a solid unit of textual stimuli to base further analysis of the suspension of disbelief in games upon via our working definition. The downside of the magic cycle's take on game formation is that allowances must be made, in a manner a lot more fundamental than Iser's (1976) gap-filling for the space between rules, contexts and coherence by the reader, in other words the reader *must* suspend their disbelief. The ramifications of this consequence are more fully explored in chapter four. This is not unakin to mise-en-scene in film, with which it is broadly analogous, especially when environmental storytelling (Jenkins 2004) is considered. However, in order to effectively read mise-en-scene visually, there is less of an exacting requirement for suspension of disbelief, less need for allowances, and so the differences between mediums come to the fore. Highlighting these aspects is not an attempt to assert, as Murray (1998) does, that games represent a stepping stone to 'cyberdrama', or that every game no matter how abstract tells a story. Rather, the equating

of context with narrative is rooted in the semiotics of the medium, and allows for the assigning of narrative value to its contours by design.

Gameplay and narrative interconnect through the use of game grammar in order to allow for moment-by-moment change in the gaming experience to be planned and mapped out by the designers. Gameplay changes are communicated through contextual information not because they have to be, but because the contextually-aware player would feel cheated if they weren't. This expectation has become built into the grammar of games. The link between rules and contexts is expected of the form even though the explanation may not have the formal primacy that Juul asserts of rules (Juul 2005 p.130). A simple example is the ubiquitous 'ice level' often found in platform games. Elements of the grammar use are shifted making movement more difficult to control. Perhaps a sprite loses momentum faster, or ledges are smaller than they actually appear. Presenting these new gameplay parameters further on in the game but alongside the same contexts as the original would be problematic for players since the initial association formed between gameplay and context would require reassessment. Players would question why this was happening to them, these new parameters would feel somehow unfair. Of course this could deepen the game's own narrative, engaging with the mystery presented in this fashion, but often instead the new gameplay parameters are matched simply with new contexts, most usually an icy and snowy environment. Contexts then have the ability to potentially foreshadow gameplay elements, and the player has no-one but themselves to blame when they fall off a slippery slope. In a reversed example, still commonplace in platform games, gameplay would become much more forgiving and the context changed to deep under the sea or in outer space. The selection of a relevant schema, the connection between space or ice and reality is incidental and only serves to smooth the path between the gamer and the representation on screen. in this case the generation of a new sign made up of rules and contexts is all that's required as far as the game alone is concerned. Turning previously brown platforms pink would serve the same purpose in a more abstract way, and could potentially make more sense when explained via longer-term narrative features. All that matters is that the context has changed, since the properties in the world that have been edited are otherwise invisible to the player.

In *World of Goo* a shift in gameplay from building structures to slingshotting goo balls, which makes up some of the later levels, is indicated semiotically through the replacement of cartoon landscapes with cartoon virtual spaces and wireframe graphics. This brave new virtual world is the space where gameplay can be equally altered. Narrative motivating gameplay change works the same way, although its more dramatic incarnations are rarer when contextual changes become more 'meaningful' in terms of the rules. *Halo 3*'s finale forsakes all the verbs it has until then employed and instead causes the player to run a gauntlet of collapsing structures in a vehicle while grand scenes of planetary destruction play out all around. Contexts including camera angles and view distance enable this, as do wider narrative concerns that both generate the climactic moments and foreshadow the main character's assumed death. *Final Fantasy XII* has an optional boss, Yiazmat, who functions differently to that of a normal encounter established across the game, possessing so many hit points that defeating him in a single session is generally too difficult. When players receive the quest hints are given through the bestowal text that things will not work as usual, and during the encounter the way the boss's health is presented through the interface shows he has fifty times as much as would be normal. Unlike other creatures, though, Yiazmat does not 'despawn' and so players can leave, stock up, heal and return to the fight. The rules are different and we realise this narrative's working via the game's grammar use and so go on to take up the slingshot, enjoy the view while we escape or prepare appropriately for the long haul, boss encounter.
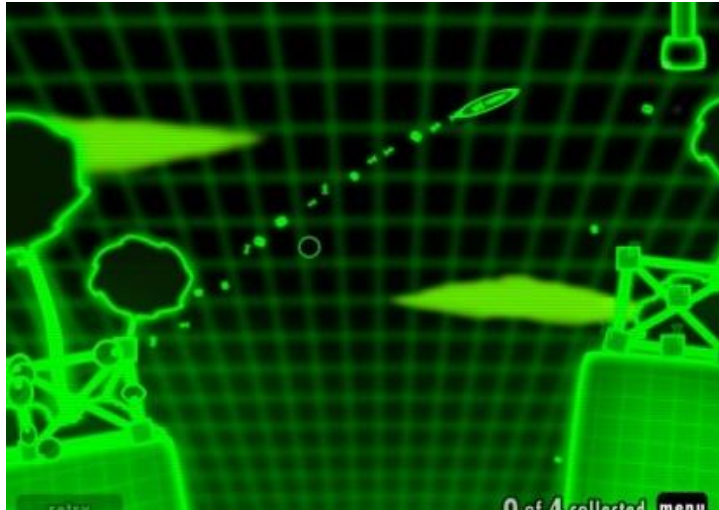
Fig. 06 Context alteration heralds new gameplay features in a 'virtual' World of Goo.

Fig. 07 Spectacle comes at the price of decreased agency during the Halo 3 *climax.*

Fig. 08 Yiazmat's many, many HP bars (top left) necessitate a new approach in Final Fantasy XII.

Aside from gameplay and narrative elements, a game's use of grammar also comprises various rhythms associated with the whole gaming experience. These include the rhythm of gameplay, relevant writing or dialogue styles, animation, the way music and sound are used, as well as multiplayer or online components. Individual games relate differently with the platforms on which they run, taking different approaches to saving data or ending the game. In fact the whole of the unravelling of a game's use of grammar could be considered a form of pattern recognition, and has a strong impact on genre formations.

Lindley's idea of a 'gameplay gestalt' is useful, when paired with a 'narrative gestalt' to characterise the flow of events in the reading of a game's use of grammar as a form of 'authored gestalt interplay' (Brown 2007). Arsenault and Perron's (2009) model of game-reading, 'the magic cycle' referenced above, takes account of these two dimensions, adds a third, hermeneutic element and observes the entire process over time. Though I have taken issue with some of the elements of this model above, broadly our two approaches share the same appreciation of game grammar as fundamental to the textual interfacing process. Arsenault and Perron are correct to extend the game reading process to encompass the entire arc from pre-purchase through learning the game to post-play contemplation. Our differences come about mainly because the aim of this chapter is to focus upon the suspension of disbelief, which operates *in medias res*, concerned particularly with the topologies of the text.

Game grammar and the suspension of disbelief

This analysis of game grammar views games as symbiotic coherences of rules and contexts, an established viewpoint in games studies (King and Krzywinska 2006, Krzywinska and Atkins 2008, Ermi and Märyä, 2005). The configuration of grammar use distinguishes one game from another comprehensively, and requires a constantly high degree of active attention compared to other media. The player has to come to grips with the way each individual text works, its own take on not only the agency that is used as part of gameplay, but also how closely interconnected narrative coherence, gameplay and contexts are. The purpose of each use of game grammar is to provide context for the controls and range of agency offered by the game, to gently transfer the player into the world set out by the game simultaneously alongside the vehicle proffered for its traversal. In short it aims to build a

diegesis, and through that ease the gamer eventually into something that resembles a suspension of disbelief effect, one which seems more familiar, more rooted in the way other media would achieve this end. Arsenault and Perron (2009) acknowledge this through the 'launch window' stage of their 'magic cycle' model as well as its spiral design, suggesting an increase in narrative scope in tandem with gameplay mastery and the ability to interpret a text over time as more of it is seen. The configuration of game grammar allows for mastery of the game alongside simultaneous communication of the narrative. Increases in skill and narrative progression occurring in tandem, the 'heuristic spiral', in many ways functions to corral the issues thrown up by the problem of the skilled reader, in that they enable comprehension simultaneously alongside textual traversal, but that same traversal still occurs at the player's pace which may well be dictated by skill. That these texts with methods of manoeuvre determined by sometimes particularly unique and individual grammar use problematise Coleridge's original formulation of suspension of disbelief is not surprising, but isolating the point from which the audience liaise with the text psychologically, the locus of imagination, within these first two heuristic spirals begins to answer how suspension of disbelief can be applied to games.
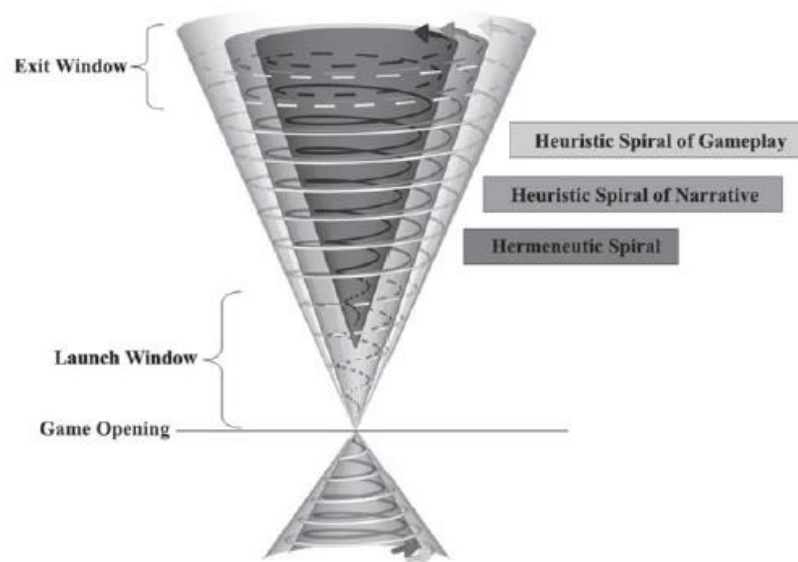

Figure 6.2 The spirals of the Magic Cycle.

Fig.09 – Visual representation of Arsenault and Perron's(2009 p. 116) magic cycle gameplay model.

Looking at the gaming experience as a form of reading in comparison with other media brings to light more of the ways in which meaning-making in games differs. This is bound up with how at odds game form and linear narrative are with one another. Endings are a particular concern. Winning a game and ending a story can become conflated, as in the example of *Half-Life's* ending discussed above, where this dimension disenfranchises one of the choices into narrative meaninglessness. Final victory, or mastery of the gameplay described through a game's use of grammar can be an unreachable goal or a commonplace occurrence. In *Space Invaders* there is no finite end encoded in narrative; when each wave of enemies is defeated, another takes its place. The player can never save the world; the aliens always win eventually and so the only way to read the game as a linear narrative would be as tragic endeavour in the face of overwhelming odds. As far as the gameplay of *Space Invaders* is concerned, the micro-tests of reaction time and skill are at their most difficult just prior to the completion of a wave, when only one enemy is left alive and moving extremely quickly. All the contextual markers build into this climax, from sped up music to faster animation. You win *Space Invaders* when you kill this last alien, yet *Space Invaders* continues and only ends in failure. Game facilities manage this as part of the use of grammar through the two devices of score and lives; score being an indicator of progression even after the level resets and lives allowing for failures while maintaining score. It is not the same as, say, completing a hole in golf only to go on and play another to complete the course, nor is it the same as completing several rounds of the same course in order to place in a tournament because it never ends. There is a high score table, but reaching the top of it does not end the game. A *de facto* alternative end for *Space Invaders* (and many other arcade games) has been found by enthusiasts able to achieve scores so high that they either crash the game or reset the score counter. Breaking the text by causing this sort of an error is the only way to finish it aside from losing. Nonetheless, for most players, *Space Invaders* is a game where winning happens at the end of each wave, as its use of grammar is iterative, accompanied by a scoring game to see who can go on the longest. To some extent this issue with endings never coming is another symptom of our problem of the skilled reader, since the skill dimension is actively working against the suspension of disbelief effect by prolonging the time between outset and culmination. Reality has to intrude in order to give closure at all. This also exposes a weakness in assuming that narrative is required to be defined as linearity rather than more to do with the way the story is told, as this thesis

approaches it. The poetic frame is of more analytical and interpretative value to the above examples than the story frame which enforces a beginning, middle and end.

However, the opposite situation to the *Space Invaders* example could also be viewed as a symptom of the very same problem. Many games persist after the resolution of the plot to allow for exploration, collection or simply persistence within the world. The positive and unhurried exploration of these kinds of texts might at first seem closer to a defined form of reading, allowing for greater engagement with narrative features, and it is 'sandbox' games which use this approach most effectively. Dedicated accomplishment of all the objectives listed in the completion criteria menu of *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* (Rockstar, 2002) leads to the activation of four burly NPC bodyguards who follow the player around. It is unlikely that for most players the point of plot completion, just one of these many objectives, would correspond to the generation of this same state of affairs. Although after the completion of the plot the credits do roll, there is still no determined ending, the game persists. Possibly, it could be observed as in some way tamed, finally working in the interests of the player by protecting him from harm and privileging his actions, the bodyguards symbolising finally being taken up by the world in which the player has proved himself. Goal-less persistent games like *Space Invaders* confound Suits (1978) definition of a game as a voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles in pursuit of a pre-lusory goal, since this final element is undefined and lacking, while never-ending tame games like *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* overwhelm their context and can cause the resurgence of the hermeneutic spiral that Arsenault and Perron are so keen to keep in check. This awkwardness of form is another facet of the problem of the skilled reader; a suspension of disbelief model for games has to legislate for these eventualities. If Murray had been playing *Tetris* in its levelled Game-boy incarnation (Bullet-proof Software, 1989) where strange cut-scenes play upon passing certain score levels, her interpretation would need to have been channelled by them rather than, or in addition to, the visuals which made the idea of 'clearing your desk' so appealing.
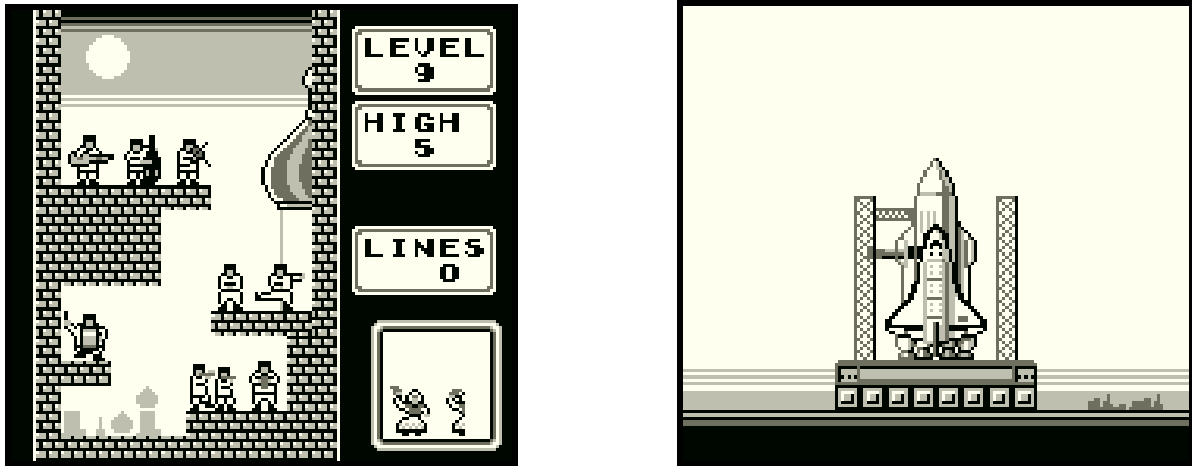
Fig.10 the strange cut-scenes that play at high score
levels or survival times in the game-boy version of
Tetris.

This different or hybridised form of narrative delivery favours the delivery mechanism, to some extent, over the content. It is important to remember that all the games mentioned so far could potentially be completed through a 'brute force' approach given sufficient time. Thus it is important not to conflate traversal with actual reading. This is another benefit of the enclosed hermeneutic spiral, showing that this meaning is not necessarily something inherent in the text, but rather generated by the player in relation to the text. However, although there is little that is uniquely personal about a playthrough of any of these games, the individual relationship of a player to the use of grammar over the course of a whole game reading can become intense, because it is a relationship focused upon learning, mastery and empowerment. The relationship of player to game will be as individual as each text's own grammar use is, since the journey through the text is what interactivity enables. These are all tools which designers can work with to narrative effect and which hold currency as part of a potential meaning system depending on how they are mixed and configured. They are aspects of the experience which can be modified and tweaked by the designer, and they are all also characteristics of a 'skilled' gamer (as literate player, solidifying the distinction between the terms gamer and player as they are being used in this thesis[defined on page 6]). Seeing the existence of these malleable aspects alone as sufficient to disqualify games from a claim to a corner of the mantle of the 'literary' would

be fruitless[30], but the fact remains that these particular elements mark games out as different from other 'literary' texts. The relationship between the player and this contextualised grammar use is where we must site and always begin our observations when we try to isolate the suspension of disbelief in games. It is giving the medium its due. As will be made clear over the rest of this chapter, focusing in on this relationship turns the issues with 'skilled' readers and suspension of disbelief on their head. Through this focus we are able to view what might seem to grate against games' imaginative potential as capable of enhancing this same potential and enabling greater imaginative coherency via a form of suspension of disbelief. However, taking up this viewpoint means ceding a very important point, which was part of what brought us to this conclusion in the first place. We noted that 'skill' was a formal component of games when we contrasted them directly with literary texts in chapter one, giving the example of text parsers failing to react to players' input. Skill as a formal component was refined down into the positioning of the reader relative to the text in chapter two, and now we have isolated this location, and it is not the same as that occupied by other readers in other media. By virtue of this need to encompass skill we are now discussing a reader figure who stands at the centre of this spiral, textual whirlwind. This must be borne in mind when building further conclusions, and in addition, we have come no closer to solving the problem of dissonance between gameplay and narrative, which from this new perspective looms larger than ever.

 If it is the delicate relationship between gamer and grammar which calls for exploration, then there are so many examples of its never quite working, or creating not the suspension of disbelief effect but dissonance which works counter to it. We will seek out where we can find elements or echoes of the suspension of disbelief in different parts of the physical gaming experience in chapter four, and these will help inform our final approach upon the problem of dissonance itself in chapter five. Remaining this many lenses out, and trying to observe the entirety of a game playing experience as engagement with an the use of game grammar can show the effects that this observation of their positioning has on players. However, continuing to observe games from the perspective of their use of grammar does empower some elements of narrative experience which are ably outlined by narratologists more concerned with VR than videogames (Laurel 1991, Murray 1998, Ryan 2003), including

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[30] This forms the core of Norman N Holland's (2009) thesis, and is taken up and discussed in chapter four.

the player becoming empowered to change the game/context state on the level of story thus encouraging a closer relationship to plot. First person narrative in other medias cannot claim the same immediacy and direct engagement as first person games allow through interactivity.

To some extent the suspension of disbelief in traditional media takes up a similar position to the technical role of narrative or context in the construction of a computer game, as described above. It can also be seen as just another pattern to be recognised, this one in terms of the player's required 'acceptances'. But seeing it as such leads to a feeling of hollowness in game narratives often lamented by critics of the medium as a storytelling space. Games can never be effective narrative vehicles if players and game writers themselves treat the experience of narrative as if it is the same as in other media. Encouraged by ever-increasing graphical fidelity and games' leaning heavily on filmic storytelling techniques, there are significant dangers that this approach will become entrenched, and game storytelling will remain misaligned to games; the ruled, skill-focused element of the experience becoming ever more conspicuous in its difference. A recent review of action-adventure game *Uncharted 3* (Naughty Dog, 2011) deviated from the majority of critics in taking the game to task:

> In order to ensure each set-piece is set off correctly, the game commits the cardinal sin of insinuating you have full control of your character, but in fact tugging you towards trigger points - making sure you're in the right spot to tumble over the bonnet of that braking car, for example. Likewise, mistimed leaps are given a gentle physics-defying boost to reduce the staccato rhythm of having to restart a section. (Parkin, 2012)

Taking skill out of the equation resulted in the pithy conclusion that 'your freedom of choice risks ruining the shot'. This kind of awkward disconnect, a definite example of gestalt-breaking dissonance, comes from the developer's ignoring how the problem of the skilled reader impacts the games-specific form of suspension of disbelief. Instead of suspending disbelief in an unfolding game the same way as when watching a film or reading a book, gamers have to remould their suspension of disbelief around the rigidity of the ruled form just as game narrative must. The player is being tacitly asked to forget the fact that it is

controls which allow for the action on screen, but is also tasked with manipulating these controls to full effect. In short they are being asked to play the game experience as a gamer but then disavow this, and read the game experience as a spectator in order to extract as much as possible from the narrative component. When the gameplay gestalt recedes to be replaced by the narrative gestalt, heralding an approaching change in gameplay, the spectator is expected to fill in the blanks with their imagination. Players generally do this naturally, but can be better served by games which are themselves aware of this element and incorporate it into their narrative, as the examples of the *Lost Odyssey* dream sequences coming at apt moments in the rhythm of gameplay, such as when characters rest and recharge show (described fully earlier on, page 27). When Coleridge (1817, p.6) wrote of 'shadows of the imagination' (full citation on page 57-58), he was referring to 'persons and characters' within the provisions of the poetic fictional space. Those 'shadows' were what he balanced the suspension of disbelief around, since he was working with literature and poetry they were central to his medium. In games, what is so important about observing titles' use of grammar is that they explicate a characteristic of the medium; a shifting of the 'shadows of the imagination' from characters to contexts for rules. It is interactivity and the 'skill' component of the medium which achieves this rebalancing. While it does reshape the concept to a degree, this shift does not make suspension of disbelief redundant, since Coleridge conceived it to be sufficiently robust[31]. Through this rebalancing, contexts cloaking rules make up a new, complicated form of textual stimuli for games, to refer back to our working definition of suspension of disbelief (page 87). The individuality afforded them by games' varying use of grammar ensures that it is grammar usage which governs the terms on which these textual stimuli, and by extension the contours of suspension of disbelief, are offered to gamers, with the power to avoid dissonance firmly in the hands of the designer.

Immersion

If the use of game grammar makes up the textual stimuli that players interact with to suspend their disbelief, then next to define is the other end of the process, the implications of suspending one's disbelief. What would be the equivalent to Coleridge's 'poetic faith', the

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[31] Although deployed in *Lyrical Ballads* as an enterprise of language, suspension of disbelief was developed as a principle of aesthetic philosophy at further removes from the makeup of actual literary endeavor.

payoff for the effort of suspending disbelief? The simple answer that springs almost too readily to mind is a single word: immersion, but this whole element of gaming is complex and fraught. This chapter seeks to understand what sets games apart from other media, and that difference might in turn be responsible for differences in the form of suspension of disbelief. Immersion is the next logical place to seek this out, while attempting to galvanise the answers we have come to so far regarding this first of these three problems: What are the benefits of locating the player where we have decided to? What elements of suspension of disbelief can we observe now which were masked before? Examining immersion works towards answering these questions and enunciating this thesis' first significant conclusion.

Immersion is certainly, alongside the complex structure of game-texts, one of the elements that differentiate games from that which has come before. When game theorists or new media theorists talk about immersion they may be tuned into the wavelength of old media texts, or forming a nostalgic nod to earlier conceptions of the textual interfacing process. Suspension of disbelief on the other hand is a term rooted in old media, and in some discourses connected with 'High' culture. It can be seen to carry connotations of the lower-tech and socially accepted media within its rhetorical payload. It is unsurprising that Coleridge's phrase has received short shrift from games studies theorists, who are for the most part as guilty as the other suspects Ferri (2007) prosecuted for improper, often entirely rhetorical use of the term, outlined in previous chapters. Grappling with this awkward old media concept of suspension of disbelief, often unwillingly since they feel obligated to give such a ubiquitous and popular phrase its due, has led in part to the problematic location immersion now occupies for games studies, comprising a very specific and completely general term all at once. Introducing his redefinition of immersion, Calleja turns first to an eerily familiar example:

> A staple image of cyberpunk movies is the prone, headset-clad body connected to a virtual reality machine via cables connected to implanted neural jacks. The figure could well be dead if it wasn't for the occasional twitch and spasm betraying the possibility that it is, in fact, dreaming. But this is not your average vivid dream. It's lucid dreaming on demand; a pay-per-act performance inside a digital world so compelling it makes separation from the non-mediated challenging. (2007 p.82)

Could this image be the final remediation of Coleridge's figure of the dreamer? Two possibilities present themselves. Firstly, compared to Coleridge's dreamer, this dreamer's imagination is constrained, mediated by technology, albeit imperfect technology compared to the 'Holodeck' panacea which makes up most 'total immersion' examples (Murray 1998, Ryan 2003, Castronova 2007). This dreamer has no disbelief to suspend, no basis in reality to transcend. On the other hand this is almost a perfect representation of Coleridge's ideal reader, so overwhelmed by the text that they take up the figure of the dreamer by default; duped, fully interpellated, uncritical and un-agentic. Calleja too has problems with this image from a different direction, and we both agree this figure does not represent modern videogames or the modern gamer. However the spectre of the Holodeck and its dreamer-by-default does hold sway not only over many who define immersion in games, but also over players as they try to make sense of and read the disjointed narrato-ludic artefacts served up to them by the games industry. It is not this chapter nor this thesis' aim to redefine immersion, only to make use of its distinction from the suspension of disbelief. This will be accomplished by observing the various definitions and the angles theorists come at immersion from, as well as how they brush up against the notion of suspension of disbelief when discussing immersion.

Immersion is a term that has been claimed and used in many different ways in relation to videogames. Much of its loaded significance is the responsibility of the modern games industry, which deploys it at every turn in an attempt to make sales[32]. Often, 'immersion' in these contexts is merely shorthand for the latest gameplay innovations, or advances in graphical technology, the fetishism of the 'techno-magic circle', notable by its absence when we see an old piece of technology that no longer holds, but may still tout this cutting-edge currency. Calleja notes this awkward connection and attempts to rescue the term by redefining it. He diversifies 'immersion' from the terms that originated it: 'telepresence' and 'presence', and sums up the status quo:

> Immersion finds its most frequent application in the context of digital games. Here it is applied in a number of contexts including general absorption or engagement, realism, addiction, identification with game characters or more specifically relating to the sense of presence. This looseness of application is perhaps understandable when it

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[32] This element is discussed in further detail in chapter 5.

comes to industrial or popular uses of the term, but is also common within academic digital Game Studies. (2007 p.88)

Calleja is right to call time on this problematic use of a catch-all term which has been used in so many different ways that its meaning in our particular field has become eroded, and he is not the first to rail against it. McMahon (2003) also did so, hinging some of her analysis around early VR, which aimed to be perceptually immersive. Different definitions of immersion have from that technological juncture led to assumptions being made about the game reading process which obscure or simplify the point where much of the action is going on. The question of what takes place between the player and the screen shouldn't be answerable with a single word. Designers and theorists are equally guilty of both defining immersion on the hoof and deploying it, as well as the concept of suspension of disbelief, strategically to meet their own ends.

Designers on Immersion

Design manuals brim with definitions of immersion, and often make quick reference to the suspension of disbelief into the bargain. Rollings & Adams at first define it fairly well, stating

> Suspension of disbelief is a mental state in which you choose, for a period of time, to believe that this pack of lies, this fiction, is reality. This applies to games as well. When you go inside the game world and temporarily make it your reality, you suspend your disbelief. The better a game supports the illusion…the more *immersive* we say the game is. Immersiveness is one of the holy grails of game design. (2003, p.58)

Suspension of disbelief is following Coleridge's formulation a separate, activated state chosen by the player which is the condition of immersion, and the creation of an immersive environment should be the goal of the game designer. This is contradicted in their very next paragraph, where suddenly the two are conflated:

> More often, however, suspension of disbelief is broken by poor design. This might occur if one of the people in the story does something that is wildly out of character, or if something highly improbable happens – a deus ex machina - and we are

expected to accept it as normal. Another thing that frequently destroys a player's suspension of disbelief or prevents it from forming is a lack of harmony (ibid, p.58)

Suddenly suspension of disbelief is the responsibility of the game designer, and destroying suspension of disbelief, which is no longer in the hands of the player, no longer an active, *willed* choice, is the same thing as destroying immersion. One has really become shorthand for the other.

It is true that the suspension of disbelief is not solely the responsibility of the reader, and is something that must be in Coleridge's words, 'procured', solicited by textual design. Coleridge's prefaces form a case in point for this. However, while to suspend one's disbelief is not to forgive a game any multitude of sins, it is not something that can be shattered as easily as Rollings and Adams, quoting Brian Moriarty, go on to attest:

> …you know, the suspension of disbelief is fragile. It's hard to achieve it, and hard to maintain. One bit of unnecessary gore, one hip colloquialism, one reference to any-thing outside of the imaginary world you've created is enough to destroy that world. These cheap effects are the most common indicators of a lack of vision or confidence. People who put this stuff into games are not working hard enough. (ibid, pp.59)

Moriarty is definitely alluding to immersion, and to some extent presence (another loaded and contested term) in this prescriptive cautioning of potential game designers not to overstep the boundaries of their own imaginary worlds for the sake of 'cheap effects'. The semi-rhetorical use of the weighty phrase 'suspension of disbelief' lends gravitas to this apocalyptic warning, but does both Coleridge and the fledgling designers a disservice in asserting that the affect of the text on the reader (immersion), the affects of the space on the reader (presence) and the affects of the reader's approach to the text (suspension of disbelief) are one and the same thing. A foreign game with an awkward translation like the original Japanese *Chrono Trigger* (Squaresoft, 1995) with its often nonsensical dialogue or more recently *King's Bounty: The Legend* (Katauri Interactive, 2008), translated from Russian and full of bizarre colloquial turns of phrase might be an immersion-shattering text in the form of literature or film, but in a game spatial and gameplay elements conspire to allow the story to become meaningful in other ways. *Chrono Trigger's* theme of time-travel and a constant gameplay flux of exploring and switching between different temporal eras of the

same world makes the odd dialogue more acceptable to the point where, when one plays the Nintendo DS remake (Square-Enix, 2009) tidied up, fully legible and clear of all its flaws it seems like something charming is lacking.

King's Bounty makes for a fuller example. The strange writing in *King's Bounty* does place characters who speak in modern fashion at odds with the earnest, fairytale inspired representational style and plot. However, the offshoot of this mix is to reduce the net veracity of the 'fairytale' space through what Moriarty would describe as 'hip colloquialisms', while simultaneously bringing a comic theme to the fore. The player-controlled knight who talks like a modern day teenager feels like a comfortable player surrogate but not in such a way that he coheres with the rest of the narrative material in the game. However this lack of coherence is not final, since as an avatar he goes beyond being solely a character in the literary sense. Gamers control this bumbling knight and have a handle on the text which is more than just his dialogue, their choice where suspension of disbelief is concerned is to disavow the initial awkwardness of this clash and progress on to see how the world works. We are left with a text that, almost certainly unintentionally, develops into a light-hearted fantasy story supported by over-the-top strategic gameplay. The juxtaposition of mundane modernity and fairytale fantasy puts one in mind of Terry Pratchett's Discworld novels. While Pratchett's juxtapositions are rhetorically crafted and structured to allow readers a view of his world, the player is less compelled to comprehension of the world in the same sense as a reader, at least *if* the player suspends his disbelief. It is arguable whether or not the imaginative leap the player has to make to accommodate this juxtaposition is any greater than the ludic allowance required to accept that the units in the tactical battles that form the mainstay of *Kings Bounty's* gameplay represent large armies entirely through a small number presented next to each sprite. The player already has this artefact in front of him, what Juul (2005, pp.132) would describe as a 'coherent world game' is presented as a world that at first, in many senses, appears incoherent. Bridging that gap is the role of the suspension of disbelief, seeing it as anything else would be lending credence to theories of 'total immersion' which are demonstrably not relevant to videogames in their current forms, as we will go on to discuss. In neither *Chrono Trigger* nor *King's Bounty* is the problematic writing alone sufficient to destroy the immersiveness of the gameplay experience, though it is enough to alter it. As for Moriarty's

advice against reference to that which is outside the game world, the next chapters will demonstrate that the fourth wall in games need not be seen as such a restrictive boundary, nor necessary to sustain suspension of disbelief. Games cannot hermetically seal themselves off into harmonious little worlds that take full responsibility for all the player's actions both inside the game world and outside with the input device. These become no more than micro-Holodecks, places that press against the very outside intervention which motivates, defines and drives them. True harmony comes not from engrossing or totally immersing the player via coherency, but by accepting and accommodating the player's presence inside and outside of the diegesis on your own terms as a designer, and then presenting these terms as part of the game, diegetically or no.

But why should the designers really care? What benefit is there, from a design perspective, in seeing suspension of disbelief as something entirely separate to immersion and presence, or even taking it into account at all? Another game design manual seems to see suspension of disbelief as the gamer's giving *carte blanche* to the designer. Defining suspension of disbelief as a 'game design catchword', Thompson and Green touch upon somewhat different ground to Moriarty :

> ...suspension of disbelief refers to the readiness of the player to put aside his critical faculties and accept fantastic creations. Many games concern fantasy events – in terms of science fiction or surreal themes, or in allowing us to play in a familiar world but without societal constraints. … Designers are therefore free to create quite fantastic worlds that may require extraordinary in-game behaviour to master, but as long as they are consistent in applying features to the game world, the player will willingly accept the game and enjoy the varied challenges and rewards it presents. (2007 p.71)

This simplistic definition of the suspension of disbelief certainly distinguishes it as a separate component of the game reading experience, but its freeing of the designer from any constraints other than consistency seems to undervalue the importance of this link in the chain. If this awareness of the suspension of disbelief as a liberating element of games should inform the game designer as a baseline, then the real consideration of a player's

suspension of disbelief by the game designer should be as an opportunity to enhance immersion. This needn't be through the creation of harmony nor of dissonance.

It isn't a desire to pursue and destroy the vaguely characterised aliens that motivates a player to complete the exceptionally difficult *Ikaruga* (Treasure, 2001), rather it is an embracing of the challenge posed by the game and an acceptance that it can potentially be overcome which drives the undertaking and, by necessity, generates a form of faith in the text, faith that the game is not unwinnable. It's hard to say whether the player laughing at *King's Bounty*'s unintentionally silly dialogue or the *Ikaruga* player locked in concentration on patterns of black and white dots in the final level is more immersed, even though their attentiveness is on opposite ends of the scale. What isn't in question is that both of them are in the same state neither because the state is completely constructed by or codified into the text nor entirely due to an act of their own will. To attempt to link in our working definition of the suspension of disbelief (laid out on page 87); both have created an imaginative space or plateau, in response to textual stimuli. These stimuli constitute a world presented coherently that behaves incoherently, and a world that threatens, confuses and demands perfection in timing and navigation respectively. Both have built this imaginative space out of a consolidation of their own goals and desires with imaginative markers and an awareness of the text's use of grammar. The games' use of grammar acts as a prop from which to build or empower the world in the imagination of the player. In the imaginative space of *King's Bounty*, the weirdly translated dialogue makes sense through the coherence of the game's other elements. In the imaginative space of *Ikaruga*, the tiniest of movements and patterns take on the greatest of importance, and flows or patterns merge with some foreknowledge of events to aid in the micro-management of gameplay. This imaginative space is a tactical space just as much as it is a space for the unravelling of Galloway's (2006) 'allegorithms', his 'undivided acts' which find their avenue for interpretation here in what is itself a space of 'actions', yet these actions are cyphers, metonyms, taken up and fleshed out in the imagination. It is in part a traditional suspension of disbelief and in part an aspect of Suits' (1978) 'lusory attitude' that is allowing for both. Thus, recalling our working definition of suspension of disbelief once again, both posited imaginative spaces transcend the text, yet both will be constantly, actively, renewed by it as it twists and turns along

future paths already planned out by the game designer. Perhaps these examples are ideal readers, and the commercially motivated designer's interest in the suspension of disbelief should be to maintain as broad a potential spectrum of these 'ideal readers' as possible. Even if these paradigmatic gamers are impossibly forgiving of the text, absolute belief should be sought by neither the player nor the designer. Instead what should be sought and offered is faith: an awareness of gamers' willingness and requirement to suspend their disbelief should empower the game writer, artist, programmer or designer to not feel restricted in the scope of their vision, certainly, but also to constantly consider the player as part and parcel of the entire experience and approach them on their own terms, which are the terms of suspension of disbelief, themselves grounded in the rules of the game. Allowances should be considered, incorporated and eventually massaged to allow the imaginative space generated through suspension of disbelief the most immersive potential. Some of the more cutting-edge game designers are already aware of this, and craft experiences around the suspension of disbelief by challenging the notion of the fourth wall, as discussed in chapter five.

Whichever way we look at the gameplay experience, the suspension of disbelief anchors it to reality. The only exception to this is total immersion, which has been theorised but never actually occurred, particularly not in computer games. Looking at suspension of disbelief as a separate component to immersion or presence can help banish the spectre of the VR dreamer from game studies by reminding us not only of what Galloway (2006) would define as the constant 'activity' of gaming but also of the position of the player, caught up in the text but grounded in reality outside of it.

Games Studies Academics on Immersion

Immersion has been theorised as a textual property, a psychological element at play in the gaming experience (Castronova,2007 p.95) and a scale of player engagement (Mcmahon, 2003). It has been held up as an overriding goal, an over-examined cul-de-sac and a fearful sign of things to come. The suspension of disbelief is also in the mix, the phrase's rhetorical value offering just as much of an edge to academics as to designers. Kücklich directly equates it to immersion: " immersion is merely a technical term for...'the willing suspension

of disbelief', which is a pleasure provided by literary texts as well [as games]."(Kücklich 2006 p.108), and Ryan offers only minor caveats in a very sweeping definition:

> This idea of suspension of disbelief is the literary-theoretical equivalent of the VR concept of immersion. It describes the attitude by which the reader brackets out the knowledge that the fictional world is the product of language, in order to imagine it as an autonomous reality populated by solid objects and embodied individuals. (1999 p.89)

These definitions are symptomatic of those by the theorists who have been classed as narratologists, bringing other media's theory to bear on games. For them, the phrase is generally used as a gateway into broader discussions of immersion rather than seen as something to be picked apart itself. While Calleja's approach to immersion was to reject the terminology in favour of a whole new set of more precise terms, this section seeks to rescue the idea of suspension of disbelief from its sometimes overly broad use as a contribution to the debate.

Many useful definitions of immersion concentrate on the physiological effect of game-playing and its propensity to make time disappear, concluding that immersion is a formal property of gaming. Stephen Poole defines it alongside muscle memory :

> the optimal match of demands and skills…is the other factor that contributes materially to the pleasurable loss of self-consciousness, because if the brain is having to process a lot of information very quickly to keep up with the videogame's challenges, it is clearly going to demote other considerations , such as keeping track of clock time. (2000 p.182-3)

MacMahon (2003) and Carr (2006) make discerning use of definitions from presence theory to tabulate different forms of immersion and connect them to game readings. This begins the formulation of immersion as engagement, and the construction of a chain of different engagement types which includes absorption and culminates in 'total immersion'. The physicality never goes away, and Murray relates it back to the term as a reference to being immersed in water when she discusses the term in this context (Murray 1998, p.98). What does change is the position of immersion in the chain of textual transmission. Immersion is

correlated with ideas of 'being transported' from literary theory as well as flow states from psychology and, as was noted when designers' approaches to immersion were discussed previously in this chapter, suspension of disbelief is put forward as both the means to and the end of immersion. This is often characterised by immersion being described as a form of mediated presence that is extremely fragile and can be somehow 'broken' by awkward textual or interface design. Juul's response to Murray's popularising of immersion is an attempt to rein in much of this slack "the player may be completely absorbed by the game *as a real world activity*, and the player may for the duration of the game or in isolated parts of the game strongly *imagine* the fictional game world."(2005, p.190) Making use of McMahon's (2003) 'absorption' terminology, Juul's rebuttal is missing the temporal element touched upon in the discussion of grammar use, since often this absorption and imagination can only occur together or spark off one another.

Much of the lax thinking on immersion by game theorists and designers is taken to task by Salen & Zimmerman (2003), who spear Francois Laramie's woeful misconception of suspension of disbelief as part of their perception of an 'immersive fallacy':

> all forms of entertainment strive to create **suspension of disbelief**, a state in which the player's mind forgets that it is being subjected to entertainment and instead accepts what it perceives as reality (as cited in Salen & Zimmerman 2003, p.450)

This immersive fallacy generally constitutes the refuting of 'total immersion' examples from across the spectrum of game studies academics and assertion of the fundamentals of gaming as a medium; the artificiality of play, the dual role of the gamer and so on, but in doing so they include the suspension of disbelief in their attack, placing it in bold in the above citation and referring back to it several times as outdated and unhelpful, a gateway used by those who perpetuate the immersive fallacy. Salen and Zimmerman are unfair to Coleridge when attempting to uncouple notions of immersion from ideas of sensory replication of reality, since there is not necessarily any absolute connection between suspension of disbelief as an imaginative process and immersion, though a form of immersion is certainly the goal of the suspension of disbelief. Their conclusions regarding the immersive fallacy are that it holds back and limits game design, that "a sea change in cultural status [of games] will only occur when game designers acquire a more sophisticated

understanding of how their media operates." (ibid, p.455) There is no sense in throwing the suspension of disbelief as a concept out with the other definitions of total immersion just because it often motivates them or makes up part of their rhetoric, especially in as warped a form as Laramie's position. The big question that Salen and Zimmerman use the immersive fallacy to ask, "What if game designers focused their efforts on actively playing with the double-consciousness of play, rather than pining for immersion?" (ibid), is best answered through a re-conception of suspension of disbelief in line with the medium, as will be demonstrated in chapter five which deals with games attempting to do exactly this. It is narrativist angles on immersion, specifically 'total immersion', rather than the suspension of disbelief which the idea of the immersive fallacy is set in opposition to. A more nuanced definition of suspension of disbelief as was posited as our working definition in chapter two, can show that the effect is of great value to games, linking the meta-communicative double-consciousness of play to the dual role of the gamer as motivator and audience, a line-in to the medium for game designers as effective as Laramie's reductive definition is an easy way out.   By looking at how narrativist definitions of immersion make use of the idea of suspension of disbelief, its value outside of the immersive fallacy argument can be clarified.

Murray takes issue directly with the suspension of disbelief:

> The pleasurable surrender of the mind to an imaginative world is often described, in Coleridge's phrase, as "the willing suspension of disbelief." But this is too passive a formulation even for traditional media. When we enter a fictional world, we do not merely "suspend" a critical faculty; we also exercise a creative faculty. 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 world and we use our intelligence to reinforce rather than to question the reality of the experience. (1998 p.110)

Ferri's (2007) usual defensive critique of the phrase being taken out of context is just as relevant to Murray's position, but dwelling on this would be less productive than approaching Murray's redefinition of suspension of disbelief relative to gameplay. Primarily, when we look at gameplay objectively, leaving aside the idea of fictional or virtual worlds, it is evident that we do not actively create belief. If anything, by getting to grips with gameplay

sufficiently to enable immersion, we create *disbelief* as the gamer is empowered through agency, and the limitations that form part of agency, to make their mark on the text. Hence the 'launch window' phase of the Magic Cycle model (Arsenault and Perron 2009). If Murray's stance were assumed to become relevant after players get to grips with gameplay then the problem becomes the use of the word *belief*, so diligently avoided by Coleridge, but useful for Murray's purposes since it not only connects with the element of the phrase she chooses to cite but also connotes the rigidity that her conception of immersion as absolute and total thrives upon. The sensible approach to take when approaching theories of total immersion, and the one this thesis attempts to keep to, is to remain mindful of Calleja's warning:

> Virtual environments are designed with particular ends in mind. Even if they are aimed at more sandbox-style, open ended behaviour, such as the virtual world *Second Life*, the various forms of contingency they enable are radically more contrived than those found in the non-mediated world. (2007 p.85)

However, even in the overwhelming world of the Holodeck, the active creation of disbelief is more necessary than ever, as *Sleep is Death* reminds us, showing explicitly the player's own responsibility for acting the part in a story even when his agency is theoretically unlimited.

Murray's approach, perhaps the most radical of the narratologist takes on total immersion, is similar to Ryan's, who also refers directly to suspension of disbelief, relating it to 'games of make-believe'. (Ryan 105) Later definitions work from the premise that total immersion is a necessary and desirable state:

> Even when narrative coherence is maintained, though, immersion remains an elusive experience in interactive texts. In the last two chapters I argue that the marriage of immersion and interactivity requires the imagined or physical presence of the appreciator's body in the virtual world – a condition easily satisfied in a VR system but problematic in hypertext because every time the reader is asked to make a choice she assumes an external perspective on the worlds of the textual universe. (Ryan 2003, pp.19-20)

Poole's *coup de grace* against interactive storytelling in general, but total immersion in particular, centres on a conversation he cites with Nolan Bushnell, the founder of Atari :

> Now we have established this highly physical aspect to videogaming pleasure... it provides another nail in the coffin of the 'interactive storytelling' dream. Nolan Bushnell, the father of videogaming, made this incisive point to me: 'The big problem with interactive storytelling is a basic conflict. When telling a story one wants the listener to be swept along in a new place, time or world. When you ask a person to make a decision, you push that person back to his own body.' (2000 p.183)

What Ryan bemoans as imperfect Poole denounces as unnecessary, but both seize upon the same imperfection: games' being anchored to players outside of the text. The 'push' back to the body of the player, the 'external perspective' required by games are read as terminal to the medium's direct, linear narrative ambitions.

Ryan, Murray and the narratologists used games as a stepping stone to make theories about wider concepts of immersion in art, as Ryan's manifesto in her introduction reveals: contrasting literal, corporeal immersion with semiotic, cerebral interactivity (Ryan, 2003 p.15). Our entire battleground operates within the latter dimension, since literal immersion lies beyond the scope of the medium we are concerned with analysing. The narratologists have bigger fish to fry, and are candid regarding this, considering immersion as a grand concept, something which goes beyond the scope of games, but which games can form useful examples of, not so far from Tolkien's 'abortive secondary worlds'(1939, p.37) as referenced in chapter two (page 71). Gamers, though, are proud to, also in Tolkien's terms 'condescend' to games. They do it gladly and in the full knowledge of what they are doing when they suspend their disbelief, yet the fact remains that these 'skilled' readers find what manifest as immersive experiences within these game-texts, suggesting that Poole and Bushnell are incorrect, at least to some degree, in their dismissal of immersion. We must allow players to reside in their own bodies while we rely on the crude devices of agency and interfacing which characterise modern gaming, and that certainly is where this thesis is interested in observing suspension of disbelief. If we do this, but instead of expecting gamers to imagine themselves into the diegesis provided by the text, we rather see them as actively functioning to create disbelief inside it, to impose themselves and their will onto

texts within the remits expressly allowed through these texts' very design, then we can begin to reconcile Poole and Ryan. What this thesis proposes is that suspension of disbelief in games constitutes a willed disavowal of the presence offered up by the text. In short, if we see the suspension of disbelief as functioning *in the opposite direction* in games compared to other media forms, to put it simply imagining yourself 'out' of a game-text compared to imagining yourself 'into' a book or a movie, then this imperfection can be transformed into an element of form that galvanises the medium. Seeking this active creation of disbelief suggests a possible way of unravelling the problem of the 'skilled' reader, since it relocates the reader into a more productive location vis-à-vis the text, and explains their difference as an element of their reading process.

Solving the problem of the skilled reader. - Revisiting Poetic Faith in light of immersion.

Returning to the notion of 'faith' as opposed to that of belief that was touched upon in chapter two, immersion and 'total immersion' examples seem to be about eroding the necessity of belief through technology, chipping away at the very idea of a text with boundaries and limitations. Whether total immersion is to be feared as Calleja (2007) implies, managed as Castronova suggests (2006,p.236) or revered as Murray and the narrativists dictate, it remains without exception a theoretical product of the domination of the reader by the text and thus a fundamentally different beast to gameplay no matter how it is couched. Total immersion is distinct from a flow state in that the flow state must be maintained by skill, and skill in games comes from outside of the text, motivating a distinction between suspension of disbelief and flow. This is a big advantage of using the suspension of disbelief as a lens through which to analyse modern videogames: the replacing of the VR dreamer at the end of the immersive scale with Coleridge's dreamer, substituting the dominated textual receiver with one who, when confronted by total immersion, at best can "neither believe nor disbelieve it". This moves narrative elements of immersion out of the domain of the Holodeck and the absolutes of 'total immersion' and places them in their proper context.

When Jim Bizzochi touches upon the connection between suspension of disbelief and immersion he summarises the state of the debate effectively. Juxtaposing suspension of disbelief with 'flow states', he builds up :

the holy grail in much of our description of mediated experience - the concept of immersion - has at least two distinct forms. The older form was best expressed by Coleridge, the newer by Csikszentmihalyi. (2006 p.2)

Attaching suspension of disbelief to Ermi and Mäyrä's (2005) division of the gaming experience, correlating it with their definition of imaginative immersion as distinct from challenge based immersion and sensory immersion, Bizzochi goes on to question immersion's relationship with suspension of disbelief:

> The fact of interaction denies detailed control over the narrative arc, and in the process interferes with a carefully designed framework for Coleridge's suspension of disbelief. (2006, p.8)

Bizzochi is one of the few writing directly about games to give Coleridge his due. Modifying suspension of disbelief in this regard might not be as useful as seeing which elements of the 'older form' can carry over, or whether that framework can be restored, however. Flow states are clearly different to suspension of disbelief, as defined by Csikszentmihalyi (1990), but Bizzochi is correct to challenge Coleridge, and it is true that the classical suspension of disbelief alone does not suffice when we are dealing with game worlds or ludic environments. That which sets games apart has to be brought to the fore. Poetic faith, the *end* to which suspension of disbelief is the *means*, can be re-defined in games as a form of narrative immersion which includes the illusory, in play alongside all the other elements of gaming, vying for attention and occasionally gifted some through the ebb and flow of games' use of grammar. This kind of immersion (for want of a better word) is brought about through an active creation of disbelief: a willed disavowal of presence, not so much an active suspension of belief as a suspension of potential belief. Presence theory, where immersion definitions are generally rooted, broadly supports this, as Waterworth & Waterworth (2003) describe, coming at the problem from the opposite direction:

> The perception of an environment is not the same thing as imagining the environment. If we could have the same experience in an imagined a room as in a VR or a real room - if they are all equally cases of presence - why should we spend money

on expensive and still imperfect VR equipment? Why not just employ a good writer? …We are all interested in presence not because reality is virtual, but because – for the organism if not the intellect – VR is real, in a way that mental imagery is not.

This is enough to solidify my first major conclusion: that the suspension of disbelief in game environments works in many ways counter to its primary function in literature. It operates in the opposite direction because elements of games work together to make this so, anchoring its terms in rules rather than language and promising immersive possibilities which can never be achieved, running directly counter to Iser's observations of blanks and negations in the act of reading through a willed disavowal of presence. The suspension of disbelief is an acceptance that the player is not directly part of the diegesis, but it needn't mean that the player is no part of the *authored* experience of gameplay at all, as will be explored in chapter five which deals with the problem of dissonance, magnified heavily by this conclusion. This reformulation of poetic faith as faith in one's own presence outside of the text puts to rest the problem of the 'skilled' reader; the issues highlighted in chapter two regarding differently skilled readers and potentially skilful texts. When we see suspension of disbelief working not to limitlessly include the reader within the diegesis, as both the original formulation and Iser's language-focused take on it attest, but rather working in reverse; to assert the existence and relevance of the skilful self outside of the text through a willed disavowal of presence, then potential levels of ability when functioning within the text cease to hold such meaning. The awkward form of outside skill (to use Gerrig's terms again) is no longer at odds with the other comprehensive skill types, because the starting position of the reader is different, beginning inside of the text. The willed disavowal of presence, looking out from the text towards the gamer inclusively, sees these separate forms of skill working together as part of the comprehension process, rather than at odds with one another. Acknowledging, willingly through suspension of disbelief in its altered form for games, one's own position outside of the text is also an abrogation of the personal skill which could play havoc with games as textual spaces. Imagining out the literacy or skill requirements to an extent in order to enable narrative immersion is part of the goal of videogames' suspension of disbelief, our take on 'poetic faith'. So, when Murray (1998, p.98) overemphasises the visual and claims that "for the modern don Quixote, the windmills have been programmed to turn into knights", then the real motivations of both

Quixote and the gamer can be brought to the fore. The knights, even on the Holodeck, are not knights, Quixote never wanted them to be knights and nor does the gamer. Instead they are meaning-laden signs, each one a test of skill as much as it is a test of poetic faith.

Chapter 4 - Approaching the problem of fundamental activity.

Introduction

Throughout this thesis, our journey through gaming and defining the suspension of disbelief has been underpinned by one basic imperative. Games need to be analysed on their own terms. This is why there has been constant reference back to games, and short shrift has been given to the notion that a pathway to or shape of suspension of disbelief could just be carried over wholesale from another media. Instead, in this endeavour this thesis attempts to apply what it can that is of value from other theoretical domains to games with the form remaining paramount. One of the working elements of this approach is the insistence that games cannot exist in a vacuum and need players to function, as set out in the introduction. Another element is the careful and constant referral to games as *texts*, not because of the literary form taking precedence or any kind of direct assumption that games are inherently of artistic or literary worth, but rather to highlight individual games' analytical value [33], and help hold together the many potentially grating elements that comprise a given videogame. While this approach does not favour the literary or narrativist school of thought overmuch, regarding games as texts does stand against the problem of dissonance. Referring to games as texts may privilege the particularly literary by implication, but referring to them as games itself privileges a certain sharpened ludic dimension which is no more deserving of emphasis than the literary is. Allowing for the position of object of study implied by the use of the word 'text' in its academic context enables textual analysis of the sort that does not contravene any of Aarseth or Eskelinen's proscriptions that games be judged on their own merits. The kind of textual analysis undertaken in this thesis and many other works from this school (Atkins, 2003, King & Krzywinska 2006, Carr 2006, Davidson 2011) attempts to privilege the experiential reading of texts; to share in the position of the gamer. As such it is generally considered a type of phenomenological reading or analysis process. Favouring the position of the gamer pays dividends in the medium of games because of another mainstay

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[33] Building upon the work begun by King & Krzywinska (2006) and Carr (2006) on games and textual analysis, which motivates much of my own research process.

of our approach so far: the insistence of the centrality of the player to not only the experience of but also the designed construction of a game. Over the course of writing this thesis, the debate between ludologists and narratologists has died down into somewhere between a stalemate and an uneasy ceasefire. Gone are some of the worst excesses of metaphor and rhetoric from both sides, and prevalent now is a sense of peacemaking, summed up in Bogost's abrupt but subtle declaration at the 2009 DiGRA conference that, theoretically, "videogames are a *mess*". This thesis aligns with Montfort and Moulthorp who try to take the good and leave the bad from both sides of the debate, insisting of their target interactive fiction text that

> *Varicella* functions as enjoyably and meaningfully as it does because it is a good game, because it also generates good reading, and because both of these aspects work together to allow it to offer sorts of engagement that neither the traditional story nor a more purely ludic game could provide. (2003, p.9)

But it is easier to come to this cosy conclusion of 'good reading' for the literary focused sub-genre of interactive fiction than it is for modern videogames more generally. The problem of dissonance is certainly part of what makes this difficult, but the problem of fundamental activity looms larger. We encountered the problem of fundamental activity via first observing the implications of agency in games relative to other media types, most particularly film in chapter one, and moulded this element with psychoanalytic takes on the validity of the suspension of disbelief concept in chapter two. Fundamental activity underlies our constant mindfulness that games 'need' players in a way which other texts do not demand of their audiences. Atkins describes it well when discussing the player's position relative to the text:

> Video games prioritize the participation of the player as he or she plays, and that player always apprehends the game as a matrix of future possibility. The focus, always, is not on what is before us or the "what happens next" of traditionally unfolding narrative but on the "what happens next if I" that places the player at the centre of experience as its principle creator, necessarily engaged in an imaginative act, and always oriented toward the future. (2006 p.137)

It is the difficult receptive position this puts a player in that places a possible ludic suspension of disbelief for games at odds with notions of the act and effect of suspension of disbelief which already exist. Chief amongst those with whom a ludic suspension of disbelief does not sit well as a concept is Holland (2009), who is adamant that passivity is what informs and allows for a suspension of disbelief, although he does not refer directly to games when unpacking the effect of suspension of disbelief. This chapter looks closely at why games are such an awkward fit with Holland's definition of suspension of disbelief and why this matters by attempting to break down and locate suspension of disbelief within the activity of gaming. Engaging Holland in the arenas of neuroscience or biology is well beyond the scope of this thesis, but looking at the conclusions that he draws in these circles from other media and tying them into games is a useful way to test the validity of any proposed answer to the problem of fundamental activity. This is why a good approach to the problem is one of analysing specifically the hardware and interfacing side of games' interpretation, looking for a location point for a suspension of disbelief when the player is fundamentally active.

Returning to some of the definitions covered in chapter two, we can begin to see potential locations for the suspension of disbelief as various as there are explanations of the phenomenon. As touched upon in chapter one, it is not yet technologically possible to split the gaming experience entirely into text and receiver, as in the classical model (Jakobson, 1960). There must always be an input device, of one sort or another, between where game ends and player begins. Even Microsoft's Kinect camera-input device, with its marketing boast "you are the controller" demands that the player learn the logic of the input device for use with flailing limbs rather than dextrous fingers. Overlaying the rhetoric of games and computer system marketing seems to increase our potential locations, implicit and explicit. In fact, games purveyors have vocally marketed all manner of different approaches to suspension of disbelief, often claiming that it is negated by computers' processing capacity, rendered redundant by innovation or overwhelmed by the scale and authenticity of spectacle their games provide. This marketing rhetoric can prove analytically useful, as we can observe it with the benefits of hindsight and see what kinds of features and experiences games publishers were attempting to highlight and use to drive players' assumptions and expectations.

So, the player connects to the game via some sort of input device, and the game itself runs on a system which, certainly in the case of modern videogames, is not solely devoted to the playing of any one particular game. These three entities of game, system/input device and player are certainly distinct from one another, and potential locations for the suspension of disbelief. Looking at how to go about locating suspension of disbelief at these three different points in the medium will help us to see how the problem of fundamental activity operates. They will also function as useful testing grounds for our first conclusion, the answer to the problem of the skilled reader which was, succinctly, that suspension of disbelief in ludic environments involves a reversal of the usual imagining of oneself *into* a diegetic world, instead allowing the gamer to imagine themselves *out* through a willed disavowal of presence. (page 133) Observed on its own, this conclusion seems quite strong medicine to be applying to the gamer, so the answers to the other two problems may help put it in context or change its emphasis.

Three possible locations

Locating the suspension of disbelief entirely inside the game would follow Tolkien's (1939) logic as referenced in chapter two, and make the suspension of disbelief a product of the veracity of the game world and its internal rule and context coherencies. The suspension of disbelief practiced by the player is seen as the result of the artisan gamewright's successful textual balancing off of both ludic features and, on a more strategic level, a balancing of the ludic and the representational. Players who interface with this text cannot fail to suspend their disbelief because no opportunity is given for them to do otherwise, and all avenues for possible non-veracity are accounted for. Some games have attempted to put forward a world or AI or experience so detailed that it would cause no questioning by the player. Two high profile examples of this are the extremely detailed *Shenmue* (Sega, 1999 and 2001) games, where many mundane activities are possible, and almost everything presented in the world of the game can be interacted with, is 'tangible' in a ludic sense in some small way. The creators of *Shenmue* christened their game the first of a new genre with the awkward marketing acronym 'FREE' – Fully Reactive Eyes Entertainment. Design filtered so deeply into the minutiae of these games that it almost seemed hands-off, as if it was not attempting to guide the player but to simply enrich the spaces offered to them. The *Shenmue* design philosophy was a handing over of narrative drive to the player, tightly

embracing the 'future focus' element of the problem of fundamental activity as defined by Atkins (2006) above. However, this oddly seems to fall foul of Salen and Zimmerman's (2004) immersive fallacy as discussed in chapter three, since to actually cause a gamer to forego suspension of disbelief, the game needs to be so all-encompassing and perfect that it functions as a form of total immersion. Other attempts at overt textual veracity have led to similar problems. *Oblivion*'s developers discussed the ramifications of developing a deep AI system that eventually had to be watered down to prevent its awkward effects on the game world:

> in some cases , we the developers have had to consciously tone down the types of behaviour they [NPCs]carry out. Again, why? Because sometimes, the AI is so goddamned smart and determined it screws up our quests! Seriously, sometimes it's gotten so weird it's like dealing with a Holodeck that's gone sentient. Imagine playing *The Sims*, and your Sims have a penchant for murder and theft. So a lot of the time this stuff is funny, and amazing, and emergent, and it's awesome when it happens. Other times, it's so unexpected, it breaks stuff. Designers need a certain amount of control over the scenarios they create, and things can go haywire when NPCs have a mind of their own.[34]

Several examples were given of the game's development as designers struggled to work with the AI. NPCs were seen leaving their posts to get a snack and being killed for dereliction of duty, looting undefended towns and murdering characters important to the game's storyline before the player even came into contact with them. Empowering the world to the degree that it threatens to overthrow the designer again shows a problem with looking to locate suspension of disbelief entirely within the game. Of course a Tolkien-designed game would theoretically sidestep or design out all of these problems, leading to managed emergence that reinforced the text, as a 'successful sub-creation', but this now seems firmly in the realms of the immersive fallacy. A degree of complicity from the player, as much an imaginative complicity hinted at when the rough edges of an AI system make themselves apparent as a willingness to forgive more overt inadequacies of the game is thus revealed as a necessity. This functions as a part of the disavowal of the game's presence-seeking

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[34] A developer post by the senior Bethesda quest / character designer Emil Pagliarulo. Archived here: <http://planetelderscrolls.gamespy.com/View.php?view=DevQuotes.Detail&id=80>

features when suspending disbelief. The gamer needs to *see* this sort of Tolkien-designed game, but see it as the result of a perceptive suspension of disbelief, the end product of an act undertaken and an effect generated.

On the other end of the scale, locating the suspension of disbelief entirely within the player's mind or approach to the text seems closest to the best way of explaining it in other media, particularly literature. Here the imagination is imagined as unchained and the suspension of disbelief entirely the responsibility of the gamer. It also implies that the player can *not* suspend their disbelief and has full control over the willed choice, certainly closest to Coleridge's initial description of the act and effect (page 57-58). Transcending the text is much easier when one has no responsibilities towards it. To some degree this kind of localising is what role-players operating inside larger game environments such as commercial MMO-RPGS have to do in order to indulge their playstyle. Role-players often want games to deliver a certain kind of experience more than they want them to function in the way in which they are designed (McCallum-Stewart, 2011). Someone could role-play in the crime and car-chase focused world of *Grand Theft Auto 4* by obeying traffic laws and trying to eke out an honest living driving a cab, or role-play deeper character emotions and more complex relationships than are possible given the basic tools of interface in *WoW*. The game and the input device can both offer a more tailored experience, be it a server with more restrictive rules and character naming policies, as evident in the majority of fantasy MMO-RPGs, or a customised input device that brings the representation one step closer, such as a *Guitar Hero 3* (Neversoft, 2007) guitar controller making it easier to show off like a rock star during play. Despite this, the gameplay experience can only offer so much without becoming restrictive to the needs of others, and role-players often find themselves left to make the last few interpretative leaps alone or in spite of the rest of the textual machinery.

 Role-playing goes above and beyond what gamers usually need to do just to move games on at all, and leads to our first conclusion, the willed disavowal of presence. Building an identity and location within a game world not designed for it often amounts to the rationing of one's own agency as part of a playstyle, disavowing some of the capabilities of gameplay in order to better role-play. Role-playing can then be seen to apply to an even broader array of gamers in this context, wrapping in 'professional' or score focused gamers as well as those role-playing as a more imaginative or narrative pursuit. The only difference between

playing for a high score and playing for the purposes of what is commonly thought of as role-play is the requirement of feedback from the game for the former, and possibly from other players for the latter. The locating of the suspension of disbelief entirely in the mind of the player is almost too simple a solution, and making this easy connection is part of the reason that Csikszentmihalyi (1990) and flow states have been so frequently cited as the answer to gaming immersion. The player emerges from this angle of observation the final arbiter, in total control and able, eventually, to transcend into a flow state when the game gets it right. Gaming pleasures are often about differing degrees of control, the ebbing and flowing of agency and the ramifications of these changes. Seeing games as a form of authored gestalt interplay does not allow for such a powerful player figure, and Atkins' (2006, p.137)'principle creator' mantle as cited above does not gel with this approach either.

Locating the suspension of disbelief entirely within the input device is a trend currently in vogue in the videogame industry. The Nintendo Wii, released in 2006 had as its unique selling point a motion controlled input device. Its approach proved commercially very successful, and Microsoft and Sony eventually followed suit with similar controllers, attempting that same location of suspension of disbelief within the input device. These motion controllers are sold as a great leveller, bringing players closer to games and making suspension of disbelief, as well as games themselves, more naturally approachable. Nintendo's pre-release trailer for *Red Steel* (Ubisoft, 2006)[35] shows a player so immersed by the motion control devices that he dodges virtual bullets, sweats as enemies prowl around and hides behind the sofa when they start to hunt him down. Exaggeration for marketing effect is the order of the day in this example, certainly, but it hints at the wider goals of the design strategies behind the device. In actual gameplay though, anyone who allowed themselves to become as immersed as the *Red Steel* advertisement character would find the game over for them in short order. Even as Nintendo refined and tweaked their hardware and competitors produced higher-tech devices, none have managed to come close to the ideal represented in this trailer, itself a kind of VR dreamer in motion. Allowing for exuberance and short-term physical correlation between the act of input and feedback

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[35] I created a short link to make this video easily accessible to readers of the printed thesis :
<http://bit.ly/lmeuu>is linking to < http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_35MvPQdPoQ >

on screen is an effective way of masking the complexities of interaction. Often this is shattered in competitive or testing scenarios where tighter degrees of control are required to progress. Motion control is not the only attempt to locate the suspension of disbelief within the input device. Flight simulator games have carved out an expensive, niche form of gaming which seeks veracity to the control experience of flying an aeroplane through hardware, and *Steel Batallion* takes this even further by providing a wealth of controls mimicking a diegetic cockpit. Games come to market with all manner of peripherals from train controls (Densha De Go series published by Taito) to plastic drum kits (Rock Band series published by MTC Games) or pressure-sensing skateboards (*Tony Hawk: Ride* [Activision, 2009]) in an attempt to not only cash in on novelty but also tangibly sell the suspension of disbelief. Older titles, especially adventure games, also included objects, known as 'feelies' in the box to try to create a sense of the world. (Karhulati, 2012) It is telling that these novelty controllers, which try and pull the suspension of disbelief out of the ludic space and closer to the real are almost all huge commercial failures, unlike 'feelies', which are remembered fondly and still accompany expensive collectors edition versions of games. As gamepads adopt a unity of design, they also make possible and embed a genre's use of grammar. Early 3D First-Person Shooter (henceforth, FPS) games such as *Goldeneye 007* (Rare, 1997) offered a wide array of different control styles, some of which required grasping the device in different ways. Current FPS controls have been streamlined to the point where it is possible to traverse and activate the primary verbs of a game in this genre with only some experience with any other modern FPS. Control standards are being set and maintained, diverting from them in a distinct way can extend a game's 'launch window', to refer back to Arsenault and Perron's (2009) terminology. Combined with rapid streamlining of interfaces on the other side of the screen but still outside of the game proper, there is a reminder of Oliver Grau's warning:

> As the interfaces seem to dissolve and achieve more natural and intuitive designs so that the illusionary symbiosis of observer and work progresses, the more psychological detachment, the distance from the work vanishes. ..In virtual environments, a fragile, core element of art comes under threat: the observer's act of distancing that is a prerequisite for any critical reflection. (2004 p.202)

We can see the 'act of distancing' referred to here by Grau as the very sentiment Coleridge urged readers to set aside as the act component of suspension of disbelief. His view is similar to that expressed by Coleridge in his letters, a modern take on those same fears distinguished by the lack of personal empowerment on the part of the receiver. Coleridge was worried about acts of personal will, suspensions of disbelief as he saw them, disabling acts of judgement. Grau's fear is this detachment's being spirited away by technology. Grau's focus is wider than games and stretches past them on to virtual environments used as art installations, but it seems what he is really pinpointing is the growth of those brief, short-term correlations between action in the real and action on the screen, exemplified in the Wii controller example above. His fear is that mentally, as well as physically, players will come to resemble the totally immersed character from the *Red Steel* trailer. However, given Grau's increased scope, our first conclusion can be set against this fear since, if what gamers undertake when they suspend disbelief is a willed disavowal of the presence offered up by the experience, then the act of distancing is safe as a by-product of this disavowal. Nevertheless, it is exactly Grau's feared scenario that games system marketers have tried to sell consumers repeatedly for decades. Advertising and rhetoric featuring or obliquely referencing suspension of disbelief is rife, with Coleridge's phrase frequently coming up in game marketing or the gaming press as a redundant 'old media' concept that is no longer necessary in the new paradigm. Advertising for the Sega Saturn[36] system showed various different forms of enforced or coerced suspension of disbelief, summed up by their CEO's comment that "consumers will demand immersive experiences that create suspension of disbelief".(Rosenberg 1995) Not to be outdone, the competing Sony Playstation launch boasted that their system "no longer requires the video gamer to suspend their disbelief."(ibid) Seeing the suspension of disbelief as just another technical hurdle to be overcome debases the medium for the sake of short-term profit. Locating suspension of disbelief entirely in the input device runs the risk of narrowing down to this one perspective.

Over these three awkward examples of loading suspension of disbelief into a single part of the gaming process much marketing rhetoric has been touched upon. This is only useful up to a point: its focusing upon specific elements of the gaming experience is helpful for this

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[36] Sega Saturn adverts addressed their marketing spin on suspension of disbelief directly via a spot called 'Theater of the eye', available on youtube at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cP3ciD4Efr0>

method of analysis, but its commercial intention must not be forgotten. It has, though, helped open the door to see that the attitude of some designers and producers has located or weighted suspension of disbelief at all three of these different points in the gaming experience. An over-reliance on any one of the points can certainly cause problems which are highlighted above, but also remind us that the contours of suspension of disbelief are not levelled out evenly across the whole of the gaming experience. Games which push a particular location almost as a challenge to the gamer, be it *Shenmue's* FREE, *Guitar Hero's* unusual controller or *Red Steel's* motion controls do weight suspension of disbelief to that point, and gamers can weight it themselves by aiming to play for specific ends. However, both these specialised designers and specialised players' intent almost always seems to emphasise that dimension so heavily that the rest of the experience is left incomprehensible. Perhaps this is inevitable since the design emphasis will filter down into the finished product regardless. These games all fail to quite accomplish what they set out in their marketing rhetoric because they assert one element of activity as *the* key activity of the medium. This brings to light a clash with the problem of fundamental activity if not the problem of dissonance, since these over-weighted experiences can be very effective ways of meshing the representational with the ludic. Conversely to the suspension of disbelief, fundamental activity as an issue with the medium does run evenly across all three elements: the player's mind, the input device and the game itself. In this pervasive way it informs our media potentially to a much greater extent than passivity can be said to inform the media Holland focuses upon when defining suspension of disbelief. This investigation marks the beginning of a special pleading for our media type against Holland's definitions, which will now be established more concretely through a close examination of Holland's argument and a suggestion of angles on it which can work towards including games.

Collision of *interesselosigkeit* and *umsicht*

So far we have skirted around Holland's core conclusions, only citing him in passing during chapter two. His book *Literature and the Brain* (2009) marks one of the most current and comprehensive studies on suspension of disbelief, building on the work of many theorists who have been referenced so far, and supplementing it with neuroscience. Its core thesis takes its cue from Immanuel Kant's concept of *interesselosigkeit*, or 'disinterestedness', being key to the way we engage with art and, by extension, texts worthy of being called

'literary'. Kant's term refers to the effectual freedom over a textual object granted by the appreciation that the viewer does not intend to act upon it, change it or possess it. It is a lack of investment which enables this aesthetic approach, and Holland deploys it in the context of a production of *Othello*:

> When we are disinterestedly enjoying a work of art, we inhibit actions on it. The inhibition is a process like other brain processes of which we remain unaware. The inhibition is "unconscious" in a cognitive sense rather than Freud's. I may have an impulse to save Desdemona, but I will be aware of neither the impulse nor its inhibition. (2009, p.55)

When grappling with suspension of disbelief, Holland does not reject Gerrig's (1998) take outright, but takes issue with the idea that readers 'construct disbelief' in the manner described when Gerrig was discussed in chapter three. Holland suggests he is more receptive to the idea of a toggling on and off of suspension of disbelief:

> Evidently, the problem is Coleridge's word "willing."Some people understand that as a deliberate, conscious decision during reading. I think, in this context, though, "willing" means no more than that I am willing to pick up the book or read the poem or buy the theatre ticket. I do not think it means a conscious invoking of either belief or disbelief or suspension of disbelief. (2009, p.64)

In neutering the 'willing' element of the phrase, Holland is underlining his contention, backed up with a large amount of evidence from psychoanalysis, neuropsychology and literary theory, that it is the passivity of the reader that enables the suspension of disbelief effect. Passivity, disinterestedness or perhaps better phrased as disinvestment, is what allows for the reduction in importance of the 'willed' element of Coleridge's original formulation. This results in the effect coming about unconsciously as a function of disinterestedness and modality or genre markers connected to textual transmission experiences, which mark the text off as fiction. In short, the problem of fundamental activity would be sufficient to wall off games from being able to be considered 'literary' or a valid form of art, since they demand action from the player to such a degree that any suspension of disbelief would need to either be closer to Coleridge's original formulation, or further up the scale, in the region of the reader taking actual textual control. This approach

stems from a very particular definition of artistic value, rooted in Holland's choice of inspiration.

Taking Holland at face value, we must assume that games are a medium in which suspension of disbelief is awkward and many elements of it contested. We could assume that within games we become passive due to acting within a fictional frame, but given the way Holland describes activity, that seems almost too big a step to take. He does incorporate theatre and film on top of literature into his definition of 'literary' media, although he does not mention games. The closest he gets to games is a brief mention of hypertext fiction:

> Because the reader constantly acts on the work, the experience of being transported becomes impossible. The world cannot evaporate, nor can we feel transported into the world of the story. Instead, we are busy at the computer. I suspect this is why hypertext has never caught on with the reading public. We want that trance-like experience. (Holland 2009 p.41)[37]

Even though Holland has his finger on some important considerations, homing in on this limited purview of hypertexts shows a place where, with sufficient groundwork, games could be slotted in. The dismissal needn't be so absolute. Further on, Holland is very precise about what we don't do when experiencing suspension of disbelief. 'Reality-testing' is his touchstone, and when a reality-testing process begins then viewers or readers are no longer entranced.

> The turning off of systems for planning actions on the literary work (a systematic system, in Gerrig's terms) also turns off our systems for testing reality and for disbelieving. Without movement or the impulse to move or some plan to move, we need not check the reality of what we might move toward, *and we don't*. If we know that we can't act on something, it doesn't matter whether it's real or not real. (Holland 2009 p.65)

Holland's strictures represent a strong defence of the Spinozan school of thought regarding belief. This also puts Bolter and Gruisin's (1999)concept of the remediated text into a corner

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[37] Holland's perspective on Hypertext is expressed fully in Niesz and Holland, 1984

and, by extension, the potential 'literariness' of a whole range of new media textual types. Remediation invokes an extended form of Cartesian logic, claiming that the real (in the terms of remediated texts) – "is defined in terms of the viewer's experience; it is that which would evoke an immediate (and therefore authentic) emotional response."(ibid, p.53) It is the authenticity of this emotional response which is drawn into question when the viewer becomes the gamer, characterising the problem of fundamental activity. We are acting and reacting in a mundane, necessary way to games in order to keep the experience going, but are also capable of reacting in 'literary' ways, and not entirely after the fact either. Reality testing seems, infuriatingly, to be constantly occurring but equally maintaining the trance state, enabling flow and otherwise functioning in ways very close to those that Holland (2009 p.40) describes as part of a suspension of disbelief, a working definition of his own which lends substance to the one used thus far by this thesis(page 87):

> We go into a trance-like state that has four aspects. We cease to be aware of our surroundings or our bodies. We tend not to judge the reality of whatever fabulous story or film or play or poem we are "lost in." And we feel real emotions toward fictional people and events. (2009 p.40)

Holland's concepts of the trance and of the suspension of disbelief are useful insightful contributions to the field. Although Holland discusses art as a form of play, his definition of play is extremely broad and a binary contrast to the real. He might as well be discussing the fictive rather than the playful, and it is only semantics which separate him from it, especially when you consider both how close 'literariness' is to art in his writing and his foreshadowing the word 'play with the word 'pretend' in his definition of literature: "Literature is only pretend. It is play. We are dis-interested." (Ibid, p.58) Holland also dismisses Jaak Panksepp's (2006) 'PLAY'[38] emotional pathway, which he characterises as a special position where other emotional pathways can be exercised or tested out safely, as redundant for the purposes of literary criticism: "For the professional critic, though, literature is not play, any more than sports are PLAY for the professional, for whom they are a realistic business proposition." (Holland 2009 p. 383).Although this citation comes out of Holland's appendix

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[38] Panksepp puts forward various emotional pathways when examining how the brain works, which run the gamut from SEEKING or RAGE to PLAY. He capitalizes these terms to distinguish them from more generic usage whilst keeping, as is his intent, their relative connotations.

and is strictly deployed in an attempt to define emotional pathways and explain some of the neuroscience that underpins his main conclusions, when put alongside his attitude to the word 'play' we see a disavowal of the philosophical and literary value of both games and play, as taken up and railed against by Suits (1978, ch.13), who calls this attitude 'radical instrumentalism.'(ibid, p.133) The professional games critic needs an awareness of play in order to find anything approaching 'literary' value in his texts. The professional player, or sportsman is concerned not with criticising or analysing the game that he undertakes and, as Suits succinctly puts it, is more concerned with play than anybody else:

> Such a view of games appears to be self-defeating, for excessive dedication to the attainment of pre-lusory goals has the effect of destroying the games in which those goals figure… Because of the equal but irreconcilable demands of the game and of what may be called life, although it is possible to meet the demands of the game or of life, or of neither, it is not possible to meet the demands of both. (ibid, p.134-5)

Suits shows that it is the structures game forms place around play, rather than *ludus* itself that may potentially shield them from Holland's dismissal. It is a shame that the fulcrum of Holland's thesis vetoes games and their fundamental activity from being literary, and seems to do so really not only because of the physicality of the problem of fundamental activity but also out of a dismissal of *ludus* itself, as can be seen from his deployment and definition of Kant's position: "According to Kant, we enjoy the free play of imagination and understanding in relation to the object, and the harmony between these usually conflicting faculties leads to our pleasure." (Holland 2009, p.55). It is true that Kant's approach to play and his use of the term generally aligns it more with notions of freedom, originality and individualism, a 'rhetoric of the imagination' as defined by Sutton-Smith (1997 ch.8), than the skewed worldview of Suits' approach, defined in the same work as a 'rhetoric of the self'. (ibid, ch.10) Holland follows the Kantian path by putting forward an artistically focused form of *paidea* as the be all and end all of play, not an unusual conclusion to come to given that he is primarily considering literature . The last few chapters of *Literature and The Brain* make a sterling case for the value of the experience of the literary, which fits right into how many gamers feel about gaming experiences that have stayed with them. .One of the key points we can take from Holland's analysis that is of value to this thesis is the idea that

fictiveness aids in the process of suspension of disbelief, and indeed may also function as a precondition to it. While reconciling a ludic suspension of disbelief with Holland's arguments may not be altogether possible, attempting to work around the clean break he draws between literary and non-literary texts based on *interesselosigkeit* can shed light on a potential answer to the problem of fundamental activity.

When attempting a similar exercise to Holland, Eskelinen (2001) discusses what it means to set games apart as their own separate medium, and hones in on a point connected with both the gamer's mentality and our constantly bearing in mind that games require players, otherwise they are simply dead code. Correlating this need for players directly with interpretation of art, Eskelinen neatly summarises part of the problem of fundamental activity. He explains in no uncertain terms that games are a form of configurative practice, that is, going from "the beginning to the winning", and while the terminology may raise hackles, as the whole article has done for many games theorists, there is a purity to his opinion on artistic interpretation:

> …the dominant user function in literature, theatre and film is interpretative, but in games it is the configurative one. To generalize: in art we might have to configure in order to be able to interpret whereas in games we have to interpret in order to be able to configure, and proceed from the beginning to the winning or some other situation. (Eskelinen, 2001)

The way this observation is being deployed, as part of an absolute drive to assert the primacy of the ludic dimension of games against a perceived 'colonisation' by interloping literary theorists is part of what has made it seem so inflammatory. Taking it out of this assaultive context can actually improve the observation. What's interesting in the way Eskelinen looks at games is the neat inversion, meant to set them at odds with art. Surely if the process is the mirror, the very reverse, he implies, then these two mediums must certainly be at odds? If we remove the rhetorical dimension, and look dispassionately at the reconstitution of game-texts that it posits, two key elements become emphasised. First, the imperative of the interpretation, the ' in games we have to' juxtaposed against the earlier 'in art we might have to', and secondly the dominance of the configurative over the interpretative. The art which we work out in order to better appreciate has been shattered

by design into a jigsaw puzzle, where every piece serves a configurative function as part of the whole. Admitting these two elements of the form definitely means we are interfacing with the text a different way, but need not set the whole experience at odds with the communication of meanings or messages. Eskelinen's configurative practice can actually be viewed as in many ways the antidote to Holland's requirement of passivity, partly because both helpfully stem from an attempt to define the aesthetic attitude. In games, everything we can interpret is also potentially part of the configurative structure, but as we configure, not only towards the 'winning' but often just to see how or even if pieces fit together, we also reinterpret a combined form of these already contextualised and configured pieces. We aren't acting freely on the art, but configuratively. This is why Arsenault and Perron's (2009) spiral game-reading model referenced in chapter three is so emphatic regarding the hermeneutics of games as separate from both the configurative (gameplay) and the interpretative (story or context). If games are to be literary, then their literary element should be seen as a function of their hermeneutics, enabled by configurative leading into interpretative practice. This does require, as Eskelinen insists, a privileging of the configurative, the 'gameplay' outermost spiral. In terms of the suspension of disbelief process, this non-negotiable configurative practice removes some of the elements of choice implied by Coleridge's original formulation and concept. It also still doesn't quite account for the philosophy that underlies Holland's approach: it does not legislate for *interesselosigkeit.*

Introducing a concept from Heidegger, the idea of the 'world of concern' at this point is a way to begin to remedy this and strengthen a conclusion. Heidegger builds on Kant's work and is a good bridge between some of the characteristics of games that we have highlighted so far and the ideas which motivate Holland. Media theorist Paddy Scannell describes it well in a seminar reported by Lars Nyre:

> 'I am taking part in the seminar' Scannell says, looking us all in the eyes. 'The only thing that can sensibly be said to be in the seminar with me are you, the other participants, and not the blackboard, the overhead projector or the cassette player'. By this contrast Scannell encircles the fundamentally communicative way of being that we humans have established among ourselves. The forces guiding the shared world of concern [of the seminar] are emotional attractions like trust,

interest, relevance or authenticity, while objective space is merely the arena in which they take place. (2007 p.26)

Games, like television in the above example, get bound up in another of Heidegger's specialised terms: 'equipment'. Man-made devices can function similarly to the more abstract notion of a seminar in constituting their own worlds of concern during use. Heidegger often turns to workshop tools to make his points clearly, and Graham Parkes describes how he defines a hammer as a tool with its own world of concern:

> No mere observation of a hammer, nor theoretical contemplation of it, can lead to a genuine understanding of its being. Its "to-handedness" can be appreciated only if we grasp the hammer in its being by picking it up and using it. "Hammering itself discovers the specific 'handiness'...of the hammer. (1992 p.114 first published 1984)

The phenomenological slant Heidegger creates is clearly shown in this example, and also a good fit for games, given that as we have covered, they are related to through equipment and read in-action. Ryan comes to a similar concept from a more specifically textual angle when discussing the definition of a text as a 'world': "A semantic domain is the nonenumerable (sic), fuzzy bordered, occasionally chaotic set of meanings that is projected by (or read into) any given sequence of signs."(2003 p.91) Worlds of concern are at one remove from this and, like suspension of disbelief, are primarily concerned with how the aesthetic approach operates from the perspective of the reader.

Heidegger's phenomenological aesthetics results in the idea of *umsicht* or 'concernful seeing': the way we seek out and perceive based on the worlds of concern available to us. The word itself is not a German neologism, but the way it is used by Heidegger warrants some definition. A useful one is given by Parkes beginning with an example of concernful sight:

> The pen is something "in-order-to" make marks on paper – and so Heidegger calls this kind of vision *umsicht* or "for-sight"...Heidegger then remarks on its most peculiar feature – namely, that when a thing of use is optimally fulfilling its function it *withdraws*. "What is peculiar about what is immediately to-hand is that it

simultaneously withdraws in its to-handedness, just in order to be properly to-hand." (1992 p.114).

This 'withdrawal' feature of concernful seeing, related to the skilful use of familiar equipment does begin to draw Heidegger's concept closer to what we have been discussing in this chapter regarding suspension of disbelief. *Umsicht*, and the peculiarity remarked upon in the citation above refracts the trance state and forgetting/merging of the self cited by Holland (2009), Nell (1988) and Csikszentmihalyi (1990). Seeing a game as a world of concern, the dissipation of the input device and the configurative element makes sense, since it allows access to the interpretative much in the same way that the concernful seeing of the a television screen's goings on enables the interpretative in Scannell's example:

> The ordinary way of watching is Umsicht: concernful seeing. 'When you get the thing home and set it up and turn it on you switch to concernful seeing. What you see is the news, or Coronation Street. That you see news as news and entertainment as entertainment means that you have "seen" it as that which it manifestly is meant and intended to be seen as'(Nyre 2007 p.28)

Penetrating the configurative, we can approach the interpretative. This might seem a complex methodology but it encapsulates a real approach gamers often take towards game-texts, which has resulted in the design and popularity of even badly implemented bridging features such as morality systems (Fable series, Lionhead, 2004-ongoing), consequence chains (Deus Ex series, Eidos, 2000-ongoing) and means of traversing or altering a game's story. These features exist in a potent but uneasy state between attracting *umsicht* yet encouraging *interesselosigkeit*. When looking at a morality system, be it one as simple as *Mass Effect*'s (Bioware, 2007) paragon/renegade axes or as complex as those games which attempt to remediate the GURPS approach, most recently *Fallout: New Vegas* (Bethesda, 2010), the gamer sees both the system and the potential narrative impact; the configurative and the interpretative elements of these specific agencies that enable a Kantian 'interest' in the business of the representational side of the text. The game may well be complicit in this, showing off or previewing both the consequences of the choices in ludic and representational terms, showing how many good or evil points an action is worth, or it may cloak narrative and even ludic consequences to surprise the player later on, a technique

responsible for much of the rhetorical clout of *Deus Ex*. Aside from such bespoke examples, *umsicht* enabling *interesselosigkeit* is almost already extant in the repetitive spiral of constant retries, defined by Aarseth as 'aporia and epiphany' (1997), which characterises many common forms of gameplay. Aarseth's caveat that "the aporia epiphany pair is thus not a narrative structure but constitutes a more fundamental layer of human experience, from which narratives are spun" (ibid. p.92) seems to support a philosophical approach on the level of the reader. Concernful seeing allowing for disinterestedness to form also explains why gamers can be much more forgiving of these texts than other media audiences, and accept or in fact often crave a degree of verisimilitude not analogous to the real, but rather in keeping with the ludic. When King and Krzywinska always careful not to refer directly to 'presence' or 'immersion' but rather to senses, illusions, or impressions of these concepts in a text, broach suspension of disbelief in relation to virtual worlds they mention a psychological process in passing that seems to connect into this:

> All players are aware, at some level, that the gamescape is an artificially constructed and limited environment. Players are generally very happy, and willing, to 'suspend their disbelief', however, to allow themselves to be taken in by the illusion...Inconsistency tends to remind players of the constructed nature of the virtual world, although this tendency can be overstated: a gestalt principle, a psychological propensity to fill in missing details to make things appear whole, might also be at work in visual and cognitive terms, enabling players to gloss over the gaps. (2006 p.119),

Collapsing Kant and Heidegger together here is problematic, since *umsicht* assumes one worldview and *interesselosigkeit* another. Indeed, Heidegger's own phenomenological readings and interpretations of Kant have caused much debate (Weatherston, 2002). Heidegger's definition of *umsicht* builds upon Kant's theories of aesthetic experience, bringing important and enriching new ideas to the concept and, in many ways, inverting it by forcing it through a phenomenological channel. Phenomenology's added value in the case of game media, working alongside the reading process most efficiently, has already been discussed when looking at the differences of the game form in chapter two, and is proving its worth here. Attempting to work around the clean break Holland draws between literary and non-literary texts based on *interesselosigkeit* has been fruitful so far, even if

disinterestedness is not the key to art or the key to suspension of disbelief. Seeing a gamer as entering a world-of-concern and then being able to suspend disbelief from this new position helps to place the features of the problem of fundamental activity which are most problematic to one side. Even though the gamer is working away at the business of game-playing, this equipment operation is how they enter into the world-of-concern that surrounds the game. This is the place where the kind of disinterestedness that Holland is so certain enables suspension of disbelief can occur.

Conclusion

Those who make, or at least those who market and review videogames would seize upon Holland's corralling of the suspension of disbelief to define the medium of the videogame as somehow transcendental. Even in *The Guardian's* recent review of *L.A. Noire* (Rockstar, 2011), a game was held up as no longer requiring the player to suspend disbelief. This is, of course, as chapter three has shown, another instance of the immersive fallacy occurring, this time as marketing tool rather than rhetorical strategy. Videogames manifestly do require a suspension of disbelief, as much as any fiction no matter the media. Yet games also require fundamental activity on the part of the user, who might enter a flow state but cannot enter the 'trance' as Holland describes it. Correlating flow states with Holland's trance serves only to muddy the water however, because really the two concepts are describing quite different things. Emotional and physical reactions outside of the text, in reality, certainly do occur, as anyone who's cried at the sudden, tragic and inevitable death of Aeris in *Final Fantasy VII* or swerved their head at an oncoming bend in a racing game can testify . The twist, almost ironically, is that these reactions can matter, and feedback into the text. They bolster a sense of suspension of disbelief rather than dispelling it. In games, this is the case to the point where that hoary old example of a suspension of disbelief, the audience members' diving out of the way of a train coming towards the screen in response to the Lumière brothers' early films, could be the right response. It is potentially the more immersed response, emblematic in the gamespace not of foolishly assuming verisimilitude

but rather successfully suspending disbelief. Videogames without a suspension of disbelief force reality into the fictive, with ugly results that generally tear games apart[39].

Modern videogames are capable of asserting themselves when it comes to suspension of disbelief, and the nature of that assertion is distinct from the other media Holland identifies. Interactivity allows for non-negotiable barriers to be placed in the way of players, or to mask their choices as meaningful when they may have no true impact on the algorithmic part of the game itself. Holland (2009, ch.7) rejects the idea of a text-active reading model because of the distinction between a psychologically active reader and a text that cannot impose meaning onto a psyche, "there is no psychological process which simply imprints an external object on consciousness."(ibid, p173) This is a similar counter-argument to the media effects debate's 'hypodermic needle', audience model, which Stuart Hall (1980) and the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies were reacting against when proposing encoding and decoding reader models. However, games prove an exception since Holland is discussing not the meaning taken away from a text but the transmission of the text's 'content' itself, and games are able to make this content's presence felt in ways which other texts cannot.

The problem remains, as for Holland and for Gerrig, the position, importance and definition of the act of *will* on the part of the gamer. To return to our working definition of suspension of disbelief, we see the act of will as the voluntary nature of the creation of the imaginative engagement which transcends yet remains supported by the text. The veneer of this imaginative engagement allows for a gamer with ludic concerns foremost in his mind, such as one attempting a score attack or speed run, to push the game to its limits. Platforms might actually extend a couple of pixels into clear space, attack waves might have been memorised or animation frames understood to such a degree that timing can pre-empt representational cues. These examples can produce bizarre results to onlookers, exemplified by games of professional level *Counter-Strike* when cash prizes are at stake. Competitors in this game routinely seem to fire directly at solid walls or traverse the space by incessantly bouncing up and down rather than crouching and running for cover. They are using techniques to maximise their chances of winning in the gamespace, and to some

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[39] There is a caveat here which will hopefully grow into an exception as more designers make games with an awareness of how suspension of disbelief works differently. as explored in dept in chapter 6, games like *Uplink* (introversion, 2001), *Metal gear Solid* and *The Secret World* (Funcom, 2012) make use of reality and fold it into their diegesis.

extent this involves re-imagining that space in light of its own internal use of game grammar, strengthening one's willed disavowal of presence, rather than one's suspension of disbelief, by overwriting comfortable equations to reality with the game's use of grammar.

To an uninitiated observer this behaviour appears bizarre, and in many ways this is the reason why professional FPS gaming fails to make a real impact as a form of sport, but to one who really understands how to play *Counter-Strike* then the players' skills only impress more than ever as they overcome even the representational barriers thrown up by the game. However, while representational barriers can often be played around, in videogames the player is presented with hard, heavy, ludic barriers (rules) which cannot be imagined around. Some suspension of disbelief, some buying into the game's world, some being led by the text and at least acting as if you've suspended your disbelief in it is mandatory. You have to make, or allow, or enable the text. You have to make it make sense, or you can't progress the text at all. Anyone who has tried to play a videogame in another language, or a game in an unfamiliar genre or on an unfamiliar system with no guidance will be aware of this. Flailing at a game without a notion of control, without Grau's 'act of distancing' cannot be classed as gameplay, a viewpoint which fighting game players will share regarding 'button-mashing' competitors who trust to hope!   In fact this modicum of a suspension of disbelief is as mandatory as Holland's passivity is in other media. The difference is that it characterises the entryway to the place from which the first conclusion, the willed disavowal of presence, can operate. This reversed form of suspension of disbelief, necessary really for the idea of a suspension of disbelief operating inside a world of concern .

Seeing these elements of suspension of disbelief as mandatory actually allows us to unite both Holland and Gerrig's takes on suspension of disbelief as applicable to videogames. There is no toggling between immersed and un-immersed, since the entry price to operate the text, to play at all, is to take up its immersive qualities, which gamers go on to resist when they actually begin to play. Gerrig's construction of disbelief approach ties in neatly with the solution to the problem of the skilled reader, since by imagining out of texts, gamers are constructing disbelief in the manner he describes, the difference is that the form dictates that by their engagement and privileged position, this construction is more a gamer's responsibility than a luxury of imagination.

It might seem as if these first two conclusions are pulling against one another. How can a gamer be consciously disavowing the presence offered up by a game while also being imprisoned by it into a sense of suspension of disbelief? The fact that the input assemblage and the 'active' equipment used to make the game happen disappears as part of the experiential game form does not mean that the players self outside of the text also vanishes or 'withdraws' along with it. If anything, the withdrawal, or if we'd like to see it in a more positive light, diegetic reconstitution of what our inputs represent makes us more conscious of the self outside of the text, and more able to differentiate between ourselves and the immersive promises of the game, more able to make the willed disavowal of presence.

We now have two conclusions. First ,that the problem of the skilled reader, born of games' need for non-trivial and skilful action is solved by gamers making a willed disavowal of presence *out* of the text when they suspend their disbelief. Second, that this suspension of disbelief, or at least the germ of it, is made mandatory, non-negotiable by games' fundamentally active nature, as marked out by their enabling the player with (bounded) agency. This disinvestment's necessity, functioning as a price of agency and interactivity that needs to be paid, means that games can be 'read' as authored, artistic endeavours, and opens them up the kinds of suspension of disbelief Holland reserves only for media which are 'literary'. We are disinterested in gameplay in the Kantian sense from the position commuted into via the willed disavowal of presence. Thus the paradoxical position of knowing one can impact upon a games story, but *only* in an already accepted set number of dimensions is made possible, and one of the main frustrations of game narratives becomes emphasised, as summed up by Frasca (2002, p.4) in despair when he laments some key limitations of the form, from saving and loading to repeated 'worthless' deaths: "Hamlet's dilemma would be irrelevant in a videogame, simply because he would be able to be and not to be' without consequence". The third problem, the problem of dissonance, remains unresolved and was characterised by the impact players can have upon game-texts, leading to potentially differing readings, or games that talk back. An examination of the unique ludic version of the 'fourth wall' in the next chapter will not only attempt to answer this problem but also try to enfold it into the two conclusions we have already come to. This route into it is perhaps best summed up by one final quote from early on in *Literature and the Brain* which as we shall see, resonates more strongly with games than with any other medium

while also showcasing how games problematise Holland's core thesis, since this example is more true in games than in any of the media he would allow to be literary:

> Why do we imagine fictional people, who we know are just words or pictures or actors, into real people? We do so because our brains are functioning differently from the way they function in ordinary life. They are behaving differently because we are not going to act on the work of art. And we can sense that crucial difference when authors play metafictional tricks on us, calling our attention to the fact that what we are responding to is a fiction. (Holland 2009, p.6)

Chapter 5 - The Fourth Wall and the Game-Playing-Role – Approaching the problem of Dissonance

"As you from crimes would pardon'd be,

Let your indulgence set me free."

The Tempest, Epilogue

The suspension of disbelief as a concept is thrown into the spotlight in all the different media that it forms part of when texts focus upon the audience's suspension of disbelief directly. This chapter intends to observe how videogames' self-referential focusing upon the suspension of disbelief can contribute to our better understanding of the features of that suspension of disbelief which are unique to videogames. Through discussion of the position of the boundaries of the experience in games and textual analyses of how breaking, modifying or dissolving the distinction between these boundaries is used as a narrative and gameplay device, aspects of the gamer's unique twist on the suspension of disbelief process and effect will be isolated and then theorised to approach the problem of dissonance directly. We first encountered the problem of dissonance between gameplay and narrative, when comparing games' similarities and differences with theatre in chapter one, and evolved it through examining the suspension of disbelief in light of play theory in chapter two. Dissonance hinges around the meshing of that which is internal to game texts to that which is external, and how these two elements are bridged through an imaginary relation. We've referred to it while generating the first two conclusions of this thesis, but not yet approached it head on. What I intend to show is that in moments where games work with their own version of the 'fourth wall' are points where dissonances are emphasised to create various kinds of affect including shock, border play and a deepening of the imaginary relations which govern the problem of dissonance. They are also good means by which to explore the two conclusions reached so far regarding a ludic suspension of disbelief: That it involves a degree of willed disavowal of presence, and that it is a necessary part of gaming rather than an optional, 'toggled' state.

The 'fourth wall' primarily refers to the theatrical device exemplified by the proscenium arch. The invisible wall cuts audience off from characters and in so doing maintains the boundaries of the diegesis (the fictional world). In the terms of suspension of disbelief, this 'wall' can be observed as formed by the contract between audience members and actors. Audience members suspend their disbelief while actors reaffirm the 'poetic faith' offered them by not acknowledging the presence of the audience. While the effect has shifted away from an active, physically connected bond between those involved in the enacting of a text and those involved in its reception, the spirit of the contract remains in other media, where the display of literal textual machinery such as during scene changes or cameras and microphones invading the shot, its reference through direction or mise-en-scene as well as characters' awareness of it in the case of narrative film or television can class as the same breaking of the fourth wall.

The fourth wall is however more than just a barrier between performers and audience. Its status as a textual feature means that it can be used as part of performances, scripts or special effects. Prospero does just this in the above quote, asking the audience to finally free him from the island he lies captive on through their applause. The fourth wall can be invoked as an aspect of form, as is the case in pantomime theatre and the allure of 3D cinema, which is currently undergoing a renaissance partly because it plays with the traditional borders in a manner which conforms to the Hollywood model of movie structure, design and experience, generating diegetic inclusion when it hints at the awareness of an audience rather than breaking the diegesis. The breaking of the fourth wall can be invoked to narrative ends, a feature sometimes used in horror films, a good example being *The Tingler* (William Castle, 1959), where some of the audience's seats were set to shake during a scene showing a 'reflection' of the movie theatre. The most famous deployments of breaking the integrity of the fourth wall as a theatrical device were Brecht's plays that made use of the 'verfremdungseffekt', or 'distancing effect' which used this as tool to dispel the suspension of disbelief in the audience as a means of breaking the 'illusion' and making material more clear; freeing them from the 'spell' to make clearer rationalised judgements. The goals in these performances were primarily political, but also served a textual purpose of refocusing the attention of the text on the textual transmission process. Jason Farman defines it well and links it to videogames:

Brecht continually sought to combat the sense of immersion in the performance space to utilize a ''hypermediate'' space for social change. Brecht's process, termed the Alienation Effect, created a theatrical performance that highlighted its own mediation and, thus, created a critical distance for the theatre-goers to analyze and critique the characters and narratives. By destroying the ''interfaceless interface'' of the theatre of realism (which is the fourth wall), Brecht created a mediated space in which ''[t]he spectator was no longer in any way allowed to submit to an experience uncritically (and without practical consequences) by means of simple empathy with the characters in a play'' (Brecht cited in Farman 2010 p.104).

The distancing effect was designed to dissipate the suspension of disbelief, to communicate messages to the audience using their own assumptions regarding form and content, manifested in illusionism's 'natural' suspension of disbelief process against them by calling it into question. Brecht does not ignore the suspension of disbelief, but turns it against the audience in an attempt to break the spell of illusionism, seeking rational contemplation from them rather than simply emotional enjoyment. The greater an audience member's assumed suspension of disbelief is to begin with, the more potent Brecht's approach could potentially be.

The material dimension of theatre motivated both Brecht's audiences' assumptions of a fourth wall and suspension of disbelief as well as Brecht's disruption to them. In media such as novels or non-narrative film it is harder to pin down whether a fourth wall can be said to exist by default. The fourth wall portrayed by the screen utilised by cinema, TV and videogames has a material presence that the proscenium arch lacks, and while the rigidity of this cut-off between the text and the audience is complicated within videogames by interactivity, the solidity of the screen remains a fundamental facet of the experience. We could, as viewers, alternate between a situation where we do not suspend our disbelief, such as when watching the news, and then go on to do so, such as when watching the drama or soap opera that follows. The grammar of the medium constructs the requirement of this suspension of disbelief and thus, these texts cannot break the fourth wall without having set one up through grammar and form in the first place. This is even more explicit when the development of the modern novel is considered. Language , grammars and

'standards' of representation all needed to be deployed before the easy suspension of disbelief that allows one to 'lose oneself in a book' was possible.

The innovation of 'choose your own adventure' style books such as Jackson and Livingstone's *Warlock of Firetop Mountain* (1982) was, not unlike the distancing effect, to work with the reader's suspension of disbelief in order to alter the whole experience. They broke the fourth wall of the novel form by appealing directly to the reader not within the diegesis, as was comparatively commonplace as a narrative trope and frequent in Shakespeare, but explicitly outside of it. Similar attempts at this approach in films were unsuccessful since the tempo of the viewing experience grated with the tempo of decision making required on the part of the viewer/player. The reader/gamer had the luxury of control over the tempo of the entire experience, which allowed for a better degree of imaginative control and management of the different elements of suspension of disbelief required by this transitional medium.

The Fourth Wall in Videogames

In the videogame form, the fourth wall's position is already compromised by the control system or interaction device's existing outside of the diegesis, as has been explored in the previous chapter. The input assemblage, be it a simple joystick or a fully custom flight simulator is a symptom of the awkwardness felt by the reader or film spectator at being manifestly not part of the diegesis yet also vitally connected into it. Perspective, which is akin to the camera's point-of-view in the cinematic apparatus, even if motivated differently, does not create this feeling but may exacerbate it, rather it is the functionality of the input device that places the player at another remove from the text. Ironically, this remove is created by the construction specifically deployed to draw them closer. This can be viewed as an extension or reconfiguration of the fourth wall. Simultaneously, the difficult positioning of the player relative to the ludic aspect of the game rather than its physical implementation has been discussed via the metaphor of Huizinga's (1955) 'magic circle' (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004), and the player's playful approach mediated through Suits'(1978) 'lusory attitude'. All of these factors contribute to a shifted fourth wall in this medium that, if defined more thoroughly, can tell us a lot about the suspension of disbelief.

Within the textual web of the videogame, with the player at its core being influenced by and influencing multiple facets of the text, many elements of gaming practice and parlance defy traditional notions of what constitutes a fourth wall. The referencing of controls, the system, the player or the non-diegetic is relatively commonplace and often expected, especially during the early stages of a game, contributing to progression through the 'launch window' stage of the 'Magic Cycle' gameplay model (Arsenault and Perron, 2009) as discussed in the previous two chapters. Real-world advertising may be displayed alongside diegetic material, often seamlessly as is the case in *Burnout Paradise* [Criterion, 2008] when connected to the internet. *Dragon Age* included a non-player character sales-force with its original campaign, who would tout downloadable content available for purchase from the developers from within the diegesis. What should be portrayed as cohesive, flowing narrative experiences are punctuated by loading screens where the action freezes and similarly flowing gameplay can be held up and jarred by sudden uncontrollable narrative cut-scenes. A standard trope that still persists in many platformer or role-playing games is the reversal of motor control functions when a character becomes confused or disoriented. Scores and point counters clutter the screen or appear without any warning while congratulatory messages, social network alerts, battery power warnings or 'achievement' notifications are displayed by the mediating hardware.

In multiplayer games the gameplay and the overlaid fiction may become mismatched through bugs or gameplay features that need to be pushed to the limit in order to remain competitive, causing the abundances of rocket-jumping soldiers in *Team Fortress Classic* or bunny-hopping terrorists in *Counter-Strike* as described when professional gaming was discussed in chapter four (page 155-156). Killing dragons and accomplishing epic feats in Azeroth or Middle-Earth can happily occur alongside guild discussions of gameplay, small talk or even work meetings! That games are, in spite of all this, still highly immersive experiences is a point not even the most fundamental of ludologists dispute, and so immersed gamers must remain amidst this torrent of fourth-wall cracks. These constant breakages of the fourth wall imply that the boundary of the screen needs to be extended out into the 'magic circle' in order to allow for immersive experiences in relation to a fiction as well as a structured ludic component, since allowing gameplay and story to coexist around the player dispels many of the problems their clashing causes when gaming is

theorised as a more traditional medium, with the fourth wall constituted by the screen. This is the argument that Steven Conway (2010) puts forward when he discusses the fourth wall.

Fig.11 Sonic taps his feet impatiently, waiting for the player during a characteristic 'idle animation'

However, games make use of the fourth wall in so many other ways that simply extending or redrawing it in line with the play-ground or 'magic circle' becomes reductive. The fourth wall is also, by nature, a 'movable' concept since the line which it demarcates is created by an imaginary construction in the audience, who scaffold the construction off the rules and cues of the medium. Games break or problematise the fourth wall to narrative and gameplay effect, some of the most complex of which, the 'Mantis battles' of the *Metal Gear Solid* franchise, will be analysed in depth below. The fourth wall constitutes an important textual facet of many games and a central tenet of how some gaming genres are constructed. In 2D platform games, for example, this comes about through the long and varied tradition of game characters' 'idle' animations whereby, if left alone for a sufficient length of time, videogame characters like Mario or Sonic will perform some animations they otherwise would not. Mario might fall asleep, for example, or Sonic might impatiently tap on the screen. In his examination of the fourth wall's position in games, Conway focuses upon idle animations as well as occasions where the system needs to be switched off in

order for the game to continue. Murray also touches upon these idle animations when discussing the fourth wall, but dismisses their effect on immersion:

> when my son puts down the game controller for a moment and pauses the action on the *Escape from Mars* race game, the Tasmanian devil he had been controlling does not freeze in place. He glares out from the screen and begins to tap his foot and wave impatiently. This engaging comic gesture emphasizes the boundary between the puppet controlled by the player and the written character. It is almost as if the programmer within the system is waving at us, but doing so in a manner that deepens rather than disrupts the immersive world. (1998 p.108)

Murray takes an unusual approach to this example, describing another's play rather than her own experience. This is telling in that it lacks the magnification of direct character connection which control imbues the player with. The negotiated aspect of control, the puppeteering that Murray describes, creates a relationship between gamer and (in this example) character which is more partnership than ownership. Perhaps in the realms (ever) promised by virtual reality the connection will eventually swing the other way, but presently in games this is still a promise rather than a reality. Awareness of the player or even the screen is nothing new in the medium of the videogame, for all the reasons listed above. Thus it is no disruption and no surprise when the character starts capering, since he is acknowledging *no* input as another form of input, and also reminding the player that the game is live and the situation could change at any moment. Murray's example is also flawed in several subtle but important aspects. First, *Escape from Mars* (Headgames, Genesis, 1994) is a platformer rather than a race game. This might seem a pedantic point to take issue with, but it distinguishes the game as part of a genre where idle animations are so commonplace that by this point in games' development they were expected. Second and most crucially, the idle animation does not occur while the game is paused. If this were the case then this would class as a breaking of the fourth wall since pausing the game should suspend all action. Murray notices character movement, but not whether or not it is meaningful movement in terms of the game's ludic structure, something she would have been aware of as player but is less privy to as spectator. If an idle animation causes a character to fall off a cliff through no fault of the player then Murray's observation might be more valid, yet idling *does* cause the character to freeze in place as far as the game is concerned, and this is why

the joke in the animations is funny. It also explains the 'manner' Murray notes that deepens the experience.   Whatever the character does, their reluctance to impinge upon the game-space without player involvement is a strengthening of the fourth wall rather than, as this behaviour would be construed in other media, a breakage. Videogame entities negotiate character as well as behaviour with the player, encouraging and inviting players into the grammar of their world. Taz or Sonic's foot-tapping impatience requests the player's participation in their world of speed. This distinction is mercilessly brought to light in *Sonic CD* [Sonic Team, 1993] where, if the idle animation is allowed to continue for 3 minutes, Sonic gets bored, says "I'm outta here!" and jumps off the screen as the game is terminated for real, regardless of how many lives are remaining. This is an example of the narrative 'written' character taking control and dominating proceedings through the fourth wall, and the only example of an idle animation that also classes as a fourth wall break. It shouldn't be the worry that their character will turn against them so viciously which motivates players to take idle animation invocations more seriously, but this cautionary example should remind them to reach for the start button when play needs to be interrupted, since control over the tempo of the experience is a responsibility they hold in this media form. These animations work through, and have become a comfortable, easily accessible reminder of the fundamental difference of gaming's fourth wall, and by extension gaming's suspension of disbelief.

Fig.12 The game system is a separate diegetic object in Another code: Two Memories.
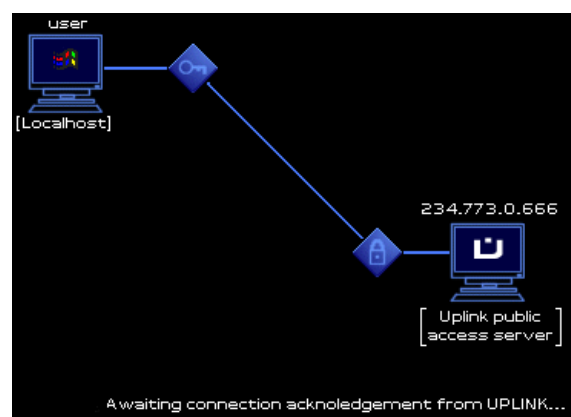
Fig. 13 In Uplink, the game system is incorporated into the diegesis.

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A pertinent example of games' problematic relationship with traditional ideas of a fourth wall is the transmutation of the input device into a fully diegetic object in *Uplink* (Introversion Software, 2001) , which uses a desktop PC as a gateway into its 'Hollywood Hacker' storyline and gameplay as noted by King and Krzywinska (2006, p.115). The player is using a PC to play a game which tells him he is using that same PC to connect to a remote computer which in turn is used to hack into computer networks around the world. Even this game, however, does not escape the input device awkwardness detailed above, since gameplay takes place within an application that locks out a lot of native functionality of the PC, and the more actual technical knowledge the user has (the more likely it is that he would be able to even rudimentarily hack a computer), the less compelling the transition from home computer to diegetic object, since *Uplink* is not an attempt to create a perfectly synthesised input device, but rather to simulate sufficiently that it blurs or fades out the fourth wall, as is often the goal more mainstream games attempt to accomplish through approaching the display of 'realism' via graphical quality. This is perhaps more apparent in the many games which feature the input device as a diegetic object less directly, including *Another Code: Two Memories*[Cong, 2005]. Conway discusses another game, *Evidence: the Last Ritual,* which takes a more physical approach of emailing the player directly while communicating with them resolutely as if they were a character within the diegesis, to come to a similar conclusion. However, he contends that:

> Borrowing from Huizinga we can articulate this as an expansion of the magic circle, as the fictional world of the digital game expands beyond its previous boundaries into other software and hardware: your e-mail client, your web browser, your phone, your netbook. (2010 p.147)

At this point it should be clear that the metaphor of a 'fourth wall' becomes too problematic, and that which has been defined as a 'break' or dilution of the fourth wall construct needs must be re-examined in light of the position of the gamer even if he is assumed to wield the lusory attitude within the magic circle. The suspension of disbelief also returns once again to the fore, since the purpose of fourth wall breaks and the invocation of that which is neither the diegesis nor the game is to have some impact or meaning

communication effect upon the gamer's suspension of disbelief. This impact is noted by Harvey, who defines the shaking and breaking of the magic circle in liminal terms as discussed in chapter two (page 84), a good starting place for a more sharpened investigation:

> Just as liminal moments are engendered by moments of passage between ritual, they are also created when the boundaries that constitute the magic circle are shaken or transgressed. (2006 p.3)

This thesis contends that suspension of disbelief is separated from both the lusory attitude, which is entirely a ludic concern, and the concept of the magic circle, which is a textual marker whose relevance diminishes the closer we focus in upon the act of gameplay and the way these texts create meaning. Conway's argument stands in opposition to this. While he recognises the impact of the fourth wall upon the suspension of disbelief, he shows real foresight when claiming

> No matter the technique, to break the fourth wall is normally to break the suspension of disbelief, to remind the audience it is just a film, just a television show, just a performance. Yet in videogames, the inverse will often apply. As mentioned above, many of these so-called fourth wall breaks actually serve to further immerse the player, extending the immersion beyond the screen, and this is where we find the term "breaking the fourth wall" becomes extremely lacking. (2010 p.151)

Leaving aside the misinterpretation of suspension of disbelief as something which can be broken rather than something which is *willed*, echoing the equating of it with immersion as discussed in chapter three, the core observations in the above citation ring true; even if suspension of disbelief is getting somewhat muddled up with diegesis to a degree. However, Conway sees the definition of the fourth wall being at fault and attempts to bend Huizinga's theory around observations of how the fourth wall works in videogames:

> Instead of continuing the unproductive practice of labelling these examples erroneously as fourth wall breaks, we need to employ a new terminology appropriate to the digital game medium, one that comprehends precisely how and

why they alter the player's experience. The critical element of this new perspective lies in viewing these phenomena not as the wall breaking, but instead as the wall moving, as the contracting and expanding of a dynamic magic circle instead as the, within which the player is immersed. (ibid, p.153)

Moving in this direction is unhelpful for three main reasons. Primarily, the problem with this approach is the unsteady foundations it is built upon. The very notion of a magic circle has been opposed and questioned in terms of its relevance to modern videogames on many levels (Consalvo 2009, Ferreria and Falcao 2009, Montola et al 2009). Propping up the theory only has the effect of legitimising it for no good reason, assuming that its relevance is assured and, in this case if taken to its logical conclusion, eventually ringing a magic circle around the whole world when multiplayer games are considered. While Salen and Zimmerman's (2004) revival of the phrase is done well for their own purposes in their work, the application of it beyond that is part of what makes many scholars question the true value of the concept. A 'dynamic' magic circle or 'magic wall' as Conway (2010, p.147) puts it provides a moving boundary which serves no purpose. If the boundaries of the magic circle can be moved at any time by the text, then when are they functioning as boundaries and functioning as originally intended? This could be considered relevant for 'contractions' but not 'expansions' of the magic wall, but once again Huizinga (1955) problematises this since the game and the player need to co-exist within the barrier, otherwise the barrier is worthless as a construct. Secondly, thinking in this direction does not help us move away from the worn out conception of the fourth wall as a *wall* when it is nothing of the sort, and in order to take on the terminology of breaks it would first be prudent to address the notion of what constitutes the barrier itself, and perhaps see it as less of a barrier and more of a border. At least in single-player videogames, we are fast approaching the point where the magic circle's real relevance is as a tissue of allowances made by the gamer rather than a set of strictures laid down by the designer. What we are dealing with, in short, is a fourth wall of convenience, a prop which can be explored by both players and designers to different meaningful effect. Finally, the idea that breaking the fourth wall affects primarily the magic circle as a means to effect the suspension of disbelief disregards a whole range of illusory and narrative content that goes into the generation of the suspension of disbelief as discussed in chapter three as well as the host of allowances players make in order to play

games at all, as discussed in chapter four. In short, Conway's approach would be adequate if the suspension of disbelief was a constant across different forms of media. On some more general levels this is the case; we carry a lot of fictionalised constructs between medias, from beliefs to values and ideologies. These become part of the diegesis of all the media we engage with even when it is not strongly marked as fiction, and games are no different.   In other, more specific regards though, as laid out in chapter one, games are different, and this thesis cannot support Conway's angle. As will be shown by the analysis of the use of the fourth wall in the Metal Gear series of games below, it is not the value of the 'break' device as a shock, surprise or twist that is most interesting. Instead, the device is a signpost towards that which the suspension of disbelief has always heightened and empowered: narrative immersion, or more properly, 'poetic faith' in a gaming context. To this end I propose that the alternative answer to Conway's question is that we stop thinking about walls and start thinking about different intensities of disbelief, to borrow from the language of phenomenology.

In the light of the first two conclusions it is now evident that the gamer can be seen as an empowered disbeliever, stepping back from the texts which attempt to enfold them in order to better foster interpellation and narrative immersion. If the player is observed in this way, then an assumed coherency is imagined onto the text by the reader. A shift in the intensity of disbelief moulds this coherency, and is generated through assumptions the gamer makes based on typical or implied genre and media schema (Gerrig, 1998) alongside the allowances made through the willed disavowal of presence in search of immersion as described in chapter three(page 133). It is difficult to distinguish an allowance from an assumption, and the highlighting of this distinction by texts *in medias res* manifests as similar to the feeling that a fourth wall break in other media can have. Showing the gamer that some of the assumptions they have made are inaccurate actually removes these assumptions from the space between the gamer and the game, it solidifies them, bringing gamer and text closer together. This is the pleasurable reversal of the fourth wall generally agreed upon by the few who have studied it in this particular context mentioned so far in this chapter, and the several who have touched upon it as part of other studies, mentioned below. Thus, if we insist upon locating a ludic fourth wall as a boundary or border, then it is located at the point when the level of intensity of disbelief is such that assumptions meet

allowances, and it is relocated in the many games this chapter will go on to discuss. Looking at some of the many ways the fourth wall is brought into play in games will help to cement this idea of intensities of disbelief to be examined throughout the rest of this chapter.

How games relate differently to the fourth wall.

Fig. 14 The famous Adventure *Easter egg*

Fig. 15 An actual Easter egg on a pedestal
marks a secret in GTA: Vice City.

Fig. 16 Mortal Kombat II's *sound designer*
pops into the frame (bottom right)

Many games make use of or relate to ideas of what constitutes a fourth wall in interesting ways, using it for both gameplay and narrative effect. The fourth wall can act as a textual galvaniser, and this is often the case when games break the diegesis by including what has become known as an 'Easter egg' accessible within normal gameplay. Easter eggs are scattered throughout games as rewards for exploration, dedication, or the occurrence of unlikely configurations of game rules. The earliest reported Easter egg is in *Adventure* (Atari, 1979), created as a protest against Atari's refusal to use credits in the game (King &

Borland, 2003), and consists of a secret room where the backdrop reads "Created By Warren Robinett". Designers have taken the liberty to stamp their likenesses on games ever since as a way of marking or signing ludically their authorship, from the complex series of inputs required to make *Mortal Kombat II*'s (Midway, 1993) sound designer invade the screen for a few seconds through to the enigmatic series of odd actions and code-breaking required to unearth a secret telephone number in *God of War* (Sony, 2005) which, if called, will play a pre-recorded scene where the game's director is killed off by his own protagonist. A secret ending in *Chrono Trigger* welcomes the player to the designers' inner sanctum if a near-impossible encounter is completed, and *Zombies Ate My Neighbours* (Lucasarts, 1993) sets an extra level in the offices of the development team after the player defeats the final boss. The effect of Easter eggs functioning as rewards to the dedicated or devoted fan was not to break the fourth wall, as Conway implies, but rather to work with it in order to galvanise the text. Playing hide-and seek with the developers, or trying to hunt down tiny extra bits of content affirms the bulk of the diegesis. Valve hit upon this aspect of developer inclusion in games by incorporating a 'commentary mode' into newer titles. In this mode the player still tackles the same challenges as in the regular game, but nodes are scattered around the levels that play commentary out from the developers, explaining what went on behind the scenes. In short, Easter eggs, although a high profile instance of games' breaking the fourth wall, actually work to reinforce it.

Fig.17 A glimpse of the player-controlled cameraman

sidekick through a mirror in Super Mario 64

Essentially commercial, Easter eggs cater to fan interests and very rarely impact actual gameplay; demonstrably and obviously not forming part of how games are supposed to be played. However, the fourth wall sometimes does form part of how games are designed that goes beyond the usual referencing of controls or interface features. Occasionally complex controls are made simpler by incorporating them into the diegesis, pushing them over to the other side of the 'wall' border and making them part of the game. *Super Mario 64* (Nintendo, 1996) made use of this technique to introduce the complex element of player-assisted camera control, still a relative novelty in platform games at this time, via a camera-toting sidekick who followed Mario around in the world and whose movement was what players controlled rather than the more abstract idea of camera angles. The camera was not simply a viewpoint, it was a character in the diegesis, who could be seen in mirrors and offer advice about the best ways to move around. Once again, camera control was solidified from an allowance into an assumption through incorporating the element into the diegesis. The fourth wall can be brought into play to make some elements of gameplay stand out as disconcerting: a classic example of this, as stated above, is the 'confusion' mechanic used by many platform games and RPGs, where normal controls are reversed suddenly, challenging the player to twist their play style for short periods of time. Sometimes mechanics can break the fourth wall, or it can represent the solution to a puzzle. *Legend of Zelda: The Phantom Hourglass* (Nintendo, 2007) requires the player at one point to make a rubbing from an ancient monument. Repeatedly told to press the paper to the stone, the solution to the puzzle is to close the DS console together and 'press' the two screens. That this usually suspends gameplay, putting the device into 'sleep' mode is both the assumption that must be overcome and the fourth wall break. *Hotel Dusk* (Cing, 2007) requires the same sort of lateral thinking, where the player needs to realise that the many functions of the DS console are active and in-play without the prompting from the game that is usually standard. Horror films have often made use of the fourth wall to ratchet up the tension and payoff of some of their set-pieces, and horror videogames also take advantage of this, most commonly by equating the fourth wall with psychological wellbeing. In E*ternal Darkness,* the fourth wall begins to function erratically when the player's 'sanity meter' is low, and unusual effects such as screen interference, audio drop-offs and clipping, where ground or walls lose solidity and character models walk straight through them, begin to occur. These effects run the gamut from traditional horror film staples such as blood running from the walls or

hallucinations, through to more media specific simulated software crashes or hardware malfunctions. Similar visual effects are also triggered in *Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the earth* (Headfirst Productions, 2005). The C*lock Tower* horror series (Humansoft, 1995-ongoing) also engages in boundary blurring to demonstrate an aspect of psychosis and equates the fourth wall with sanity, replacing a health bar with a panic meter which makes control more difficult, causes erratic controller vibrations and blurs visuals as it rises. This pushing of the perceived boundaries of the experience outwards, equating characters' fear or madness with the relative veracity or intensity of playing impacts gamers' appreciation of the intensites of disbelief within the text. Its aims seem to go beyond a mere increasing of immersion, and extend to an attempted inversion of the relationship between player and character by making the medium itself unsteady and unreliable. This unsteadiness is the stock-in-trade of games such as *Majestic* and *Evidence: The Last Ritual* as Conway noted in the above citation. However, while he touched upon the expansion of the gameworld out into third party websites in the 'real' internet or SMS on a player's phone, his solution to see this as only boundary expansion doesn't account for the unsteady and uneasy relationship with diegesis these effects create. In addition, many Alternate Reality Games (ARGs) that fall outside the scope of this thesis also deal directly with the player and utilise alternate sources of communication such as mobile phones or email accounts to deliver diegetic material. Elements of gameplay agency are what actually extend when the fourth wall is taken up as an element of game design, rather than gameplay boundaries. The boundaries we saw around the experience are symptomatic of the way we suspend our disbelief in games. The two conclusions drawn so far from chapters three and four certainly reinforce a view of games *in medias res* as bounded experiences, simply because the mode of engagement involves pushing away from and being constrained by an experience simultaneously. The redefining of these distances is unsettling for the player who can not avoid the need for determination, and yet also pleasurable in that gameplay can take novel, unexpected turns or move beyond the usual scope of genre mechanics. When games do this, the usual stabilisers that players take for granted when setting the intensity of disbelief are no longer in effect, and uncertainty about where we should perceive boundaries manifests both as the sensation which the gothic-inspired horror games cited above attempt to engender and as flashes of potential agency. Instability allows imagination to thrive when these perceptions are shifted. Players are constantly wondering where the

game will approach them from next, the fourth wall enhancing the ludic suspension of disbelief while also encouraging immersion, taking up, in the horror game examples, the distance between gamer and character and making the most of it for experiential effect.

When manipulated directly as a narrative device, games' storylines can make use of the fourth wall in similar ways to that of game mechanics. In fact, looking at intensities of disbelief as a meeting of allowances with assumptions and the trading off of the two can allow a new view of narrative. Gameplay and narrative features often meet or collide in this same place, where the problem of dissonance is generated and games and stories scratch against one another, encouraging or even requiring imaginative effort to reconcile them. The fourth wall has been galvanised to provide narrative reactions in many game stories which bring the player into the diegetic picture only to then explicitly shut them out. Tonally, *Super Paper Mario* (Intelligent systems, 2007) goes above and beyond the basic referencing of gaming paraphernalia by seeding its script with characters who are highly aware of the medium and its storyline with set-pieces that test the fourth wall. This manifests early on in a gameplay moment where Merlon the sage asks Mario whether or not he will accept the quest to save the world, the explicit 'call to adventure' stage of Campbell's (1949) monomyth model. Refusing the call once leads to an entreaty from Merlon to reconsider, but refusing three times leads to an immediate game over screen. The player who won't play along with the story isn't allowed to play the game at all. Giving the narrative some, admittedly basic, ludic teeth in this fashion adds credence to the game's other coherent fourth wall breaks, which comprise each referencing of controls being underscored with a reference to the player, as well as diegetic death being uniformly referred to as suffering 'a game-over'. Sealing off the text in this way generates the game's self-referential humour and gives its comedic digs at game fans' culture room to shine, since the whole cast are so aware of the medium they inhabit.

The objectivist dystopian first-person shooter *Bioshock* approaches these same interpellative issues from a different direction. Tonally, *Bioshock's* internal use of game grammar provides a lot of freedom to the player. Its gameplay rewards experimentation and its narrative encourages the player to make moral choices. Narrative is generally delivered over a radio acquired early on, cut-scenes never occur and the player always has control. Two thirds of the way through the story, the player faces the game's main antagonist,

Andrew Ryan. Just prior to the confrontation the player visits a room with 'would you kindly?' scrawled on the walls alongside lots of environmental information about the player-character. Before the boss encounter, Ryan reveals that this phrase is in fact a trigger-word which forces the player-character to obey any command to which it is appended. This throws what had felt like free choice during the game into question, as players are alerted to the use of the phrase up to this point. At the beginning, the radio had asked 'would you kindly pick up that radio?' and, indeed, this had to occur before the game would allow the player to continue the level. It asked 'would you kindly find a crowbar or something?' before the first melee weapon is acquired, which again is required to progress. 'Would you kindly lower your weapon?' removed agency for a few seconds when a core gameplay mechanic was introduced later on, an ever-so-subtle equivalent to a cut-scene. Ryan confronts the player-character and, in a scene where the player has no agency to control proceedings, commands him to stand, sit and finally bludgeon him to death with a golf club, all the while shouting 'a man chooses, a slave obeys!'. The efficacy of the plot twist is to expose the distance between player and character at a raw point for the gamer, who may well have anticipated a degree of choice or even simply a degree of challenge from this encounter. Revealing that the gamer has been manipulated and actually had agency removed at several points in what appeared to be a narrative of free choice throws character identity into question at quite a late stage in the experience. Ryan's mocking "A man chooses, a slave obeys" is the bio-shock that resonates through the fourth wall, vindicating the player who has been choosing counter to normative morality and revelling in the dystopian text, while paralysing the player who has been playing 'as himself' with the knowledge that their character had an alternate, diegetic identity, a kind of ludic homodiegesis (Genette 1972, p.245). At the narrative moment when Ryan orders the player to kill him, giving no choice and taking control over 'kill', the primary game verb of both *Bioshock* and the FPS genre as a whole, the fourth wall crashes down like a portcullis, potentially trapping the gamer's own decisions and role in the proceedings inside a narrative which now cannot be observed as his own, even if he goes on to achieve redemption in the game's 'good' ending.

Observing the *Bioshock* twist as one of Conway's contractions of the magic circle is not quite sufficient, since no agency has really been taken away. In both the *Super Paper Mario* and *Bioshock* examples above the fourth wall is used to defend the diegesis against the player

but the result is not to throw the player out from the game but rather to enhance the experience. What has been pushed into the spotlight is the gamer's intensity of disbelief. While the assumptions brought to book are different, both resolve to relocate the player closer to the text imaginatively. Both techniques almost playfully claim possession of the player's assumption of characters' unawareness of form in *Super Paper Mario* and of unnamed first-person protagonists equating to presence in *Bioshock*. The sudden assertion of the diegesis via the fourth wall doesn't move any actual boundaries, the game and the story still function as they did before, only a perceptual or imaginative boundary has been altered.
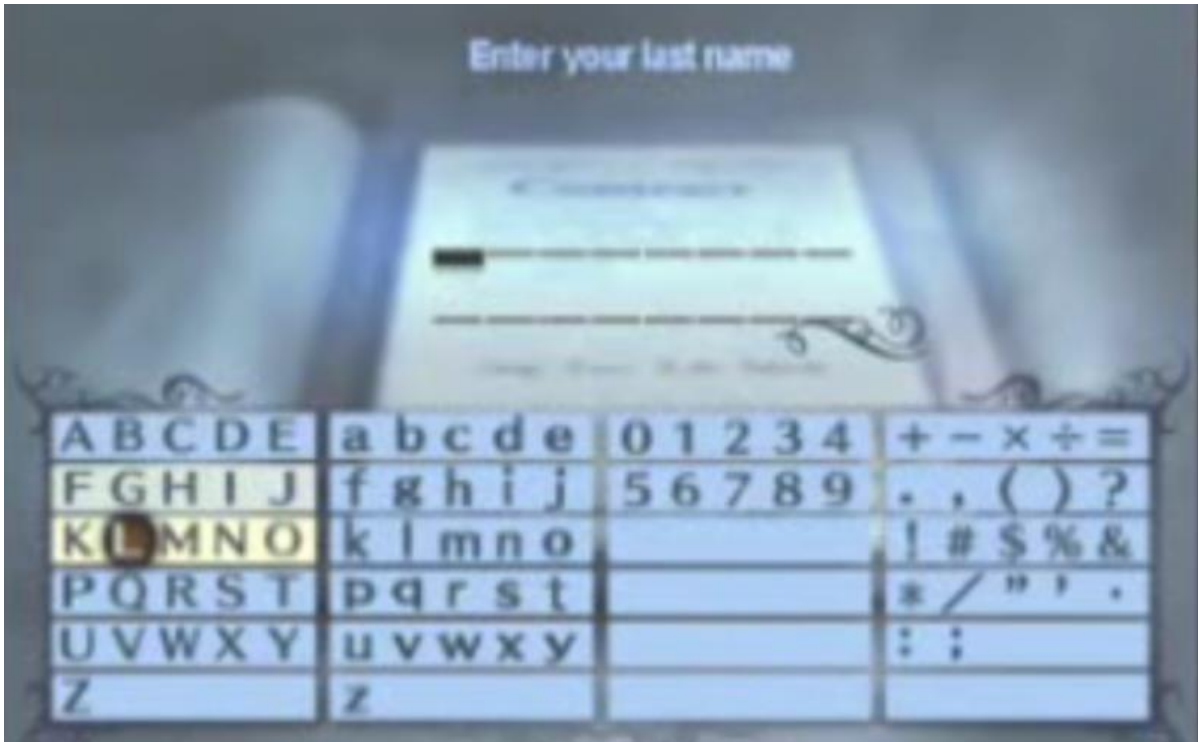
Fig.18 Persona 3 *demands players literally sign up on the dotted line for narrative responsibility through the fourth wall in the opening contract scene.*

Fig.19 Fable 3 *players make political promises signed not with their avatar's character name but their gamertag, their personal meta-identity.*

Other game stories lock out the player from the outset. *Persona 3* (Atlus, 2007) and *Persona 4* (Atlus, 2008) are extremely direct in this regard, replacing the usual name-entry section of the traditional JRPG model with a requirement to sign a Faustian pact. "It's a contract. Don't worry" says the pallid figure who offers it up, "all it says is that you'll accept full responsibility for your actions. You know, the usual stuff". *Fable 3* (Lionhead, 2011) attempts a similar effect by making the player, identified by their social-network linked Xbox live gamertag, rather than their avatar sign up to political promises on a campaign trail, which go on to be hung on the wall in a hub location as a reminder, some of which will need to be broken further on in the game. Once again this resonates with Alternate Reality Games and improvisation theatre, Annika Waern (2009) makes a telling observation regarding 'The Truth about Marika', a controversial ARG that took Sweden by storm; there was only one rule: 'Pretend that it is real'. The Persona games demand a similar sacrifice of distance from the text, a different set of allowances and intensity of disbelief, whereby the player has a duty of care to the main character. The Assassins Creed games make use of a hypodiegetic (Genette 1972, Pinchbeck, 2007)[40] frame in an attempt to enhance the believability of the stories that they tell. Not unlike *Uplink*, the player controls a character, Desmond, who operates a machine, the Animus, which allows him to 'puppeteer' another character. Thus ludic restrictions such as invisible walls and awkward or limited controls are absorbed into the diegesis as limits or glitches in this highly experimental system. Even bestiaries and tutorial hints are enfolded as research material written up by Desmond's helpers in the real world. *Assassins Creed*'s manual is the handbook for the Animus, which requires the user to lie down inside the machine and control it via a dreamlike state, positioning the player into the position of the dreamer in no uncertain terms. The crucial difference is once again interpellative, since through the hypodiegetic frame the gamer revives the luxury of being an observer, best clarified by in-game death leading to 'desychronisation' from the animus, crashing the system and requiring Desmond to start over. The outer story, the narrative which contains the hypodiegetic frame, is never punctured by death. Assassins Creed's storyline absorbs many allowances into its construction, and by explaining them within its diegesis it acts upon the allowances necessary for comprehension of its use of game grammar. Atkins notes a similarity in his

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[40] As defined in chapter 2, note 18, page 37.

analysis of the time-rewinding mechanic of *Prince of Persia*: *the Sands of Time* (Ubisoft, 2003):

> That the player who has failed this challenge is allowed to try again comes as no great surprise: this is the basic function of the save/reload sequence that is present in most such games. But *Sands of Time* accommodates something close to the save/reload *inside* the game-space, and *within* the game's internal logic. (2007 p.243)

Looking at gaming norms, gamer allowances and the assumed contract between game and gamer seems to have taken us far from the explicit use of the fourth wall as a narrative device. Atkins is certainly not focused upon the fourth wall in particular when he makes his observations about coherency and internal logic (his focus is on temporalities). The variety of examples cited so far is testament to how many factors go into shaping what constitutes a fourth wall in any individual game as game narratives attempt to enfold or involve the player, lock them out of the diegesis or trap them in the text. All of these factors do influence the ebb and flow of the assumptive boundaries and limits of the text, as well as its distance from and incorporation of the player by making up an intensity of disbelief. Together they make up strategies that act upon a fourth wall of convenience to problematise the idea of a magic circle, itself one of the most common assumptions made by gamers. If this is what the manipulation of the fourth wall does to the suspension of disbelief act, then it also empowers the suspension of disbelief effect, and this is shown to great effect in a series of games that take on the fourth wall as an aspect of ludic form with gusto.

Fourth wall case studies – The *Metal Gear* series.

The analysis above of fourth wall manipulation in games has shown that what could be called a ludic fourth wall does exist, but is more complex than in other media, as a result of intensities of disbelief which work upon players' allowances and assumptions. This chapter has established that it is 'in play' in different ways and causes issues with Huizinga's idea of the magic circle, specifically for the sub-form of games that are under discussion, modern videogames. This chapter has also seen so far the strange position of the fourth wall in games as symptomatic of broader differences in both the act of suspension of disbelief and

the suspension of disbelief effect compared to other media. The fourth wall's differences seem trivial or superficial on their own, even when connected in to the magic circle concept, but these minor facets can be observed as heralds of a more pervasive change in approach of audiences to games in general, a shifting in the suspension of disbelief effect. Many of the games touched upon so far utilise the fourth wall as a means of communication with the player or for comic touches. Others (most notably *Eternal Darkness*) have used the fourth wall as a surrogate signifier of psychological diegetic impacts or effects, internalising its role into the connection between gamer and player-character. We now turn in depth to one series of games which has had a constant thematic association with the fourth wall, where we will see how a more serious take on these elements of the game form can be even more telling regarding both the construction of the fourth wall in games and the differences in suspension of disbelief.

Metal Gear is a series of videogames which has run since 1987. The series designer, Hideo Kojima, is candid about receiving his inspiration from film and casting himself in a role closer to the movie-business' 'auteur director' than the traditional game designer. The series comprises six 'canonical' stealth-based third-person action games and several spin-offs set in the same universe. The games are unabashedly narrative-heavy, often containing long sequences of narrative exposition cut-scenes which run near movie length, the final scene of the last canonical game lasting over 90 minutes. They are delivered via mixtures of video, text and audio, and while they run the player's role is diluted to little more than that of watching. The games deal with military themes and are concerned not only with war but also the figure of the soldier, embodied in the series protagonist, a special forces operative codenamed 'Solid Snake' (henceforth 'Snake'). Snake's character development became inspired by Kurt Russell's characters in *Escape from New York* (John Carpenter, 1991) and *Escape from L.A.* (John Carpenter, 1996), and never really lost the overtones of the gruff loner with a heart of gold. His character has been built up over the many games which chronicle his history, slipping back and forth in time and perspective. *Metal Gear Solid 2* casts Snake as a mentor figure to the player-character, while *Metal Gear Solid 3* (Konami, 2004) functions as a prequel where players control his father. The reams of ancillary material such as optional movies, optional conversation sequences and written text that bulk out the franchise also contributes to explaining Snake. One constant that all the

different incarnations of Snake share is an awkward, unsteady relationship with the gamer, exacerbated by the various perspective shifts the series uses to throw spotlights first on his character and then his motivations. Snake's take on the gamer is reflected and emphasised through the games' construction around the player, a novel and sustained approach to the fourth wall.[41]

In *Metal Gear* games, especially the *Solid* second half of the series (henceforth *MGS*), the characters are all quietly aware of the constrictions of the game form, far less overtly than in the *Super Paper Mario* example above. The game form is also self-aware, creating the sort of harmony that Rollings and Adams (2003) (as cited in chapter three) would no doubt tout as visionary since it 'supports the illusion' it creates very well, even though it is simultaneously breaking all of the design rules they lay out. As the series goes on the hybrid nature of the experience, part movie and part game, becomes increasingly less jarring as characters take on not dual identities between their game and movie roles but negotiated, hybrid identities somewhere between the two, and closer to where they started out than audiences might first have considered them. This occurs much earlier on with Snake than the rest of the recurring cast in the second half of the series. Sometimes this change is so subtle that it is barely noticeable, informing the text and its themes, but at other times it flares up, creating the memorable moments that theorists have discussed when referring to the games. (Poole, 2000, Galloway 2006, Gee 2009, Higgin, 2010) The fourth wall shift that is taken as read throughout the series manifests most explicitly in the three 'Mantis battle' boss fight sequences in *Metal Gear Solid*'s (Konami, 1998) 'Psycho Mantis' encounter, *MGS 3*'s 'The Sorrow' encounter and *MGS4*'s 'Screaming Mantis' climax. These three key encounters will be deconstructed further on, but prior to that an understanding of the more subtle ways the games deal with the fourth wall in their overall construction will inform these flare-up moments as well as allowing the proposal of a theory of how they can be read.

The early canonical games, *Metal Gear* (Konami, 1987) and *Metal Gear 2: Solid Snake* (Konami, 1990) pioneered the stealth genre but were also notable for their confidently

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[41] The *MGS* series plotline is expansive, complicated and convoluted as only a universe which has had stories told through it for so long can be. As such, trying to give a plot summary would be futile, and if anything cloud some of the mechanics and tropes this analysis seeks to unearth. Apologies for any confusion that may result to the uninitiated.

pitched narrative, mainly delivered via optional conversations on Snake's 'codec' radio system with his backup team. In the first game, these featured some moments where the fourth wall was called into question, particularly when 'Big Boss' the leader of the backup team, who has been giving consistently misleading advice since the beginning of the final act, suddenly commands: "THIS IS BIG BOSS...SOLID SNAKE!STOP THE OPERATION.SWITCH OFF YOUR MSX AT ONCE. THIS IS THE COMMAND. ...OVER.". Players need to see through this odd command, disobey and continue on to confront him when he reveals his treachery. Players are required to look in the game's manual for a codec frequency during *Metal Gear 2*, one of several anti-piracy measures not uncommon in games from this period, executed with a diegetic flourish as a shift of radio frequency done in order to avoid interception. This technique as well as others would be reprised when the franchise was revived 8 years later.

After the long hiatus, *MGS* was a well trailed, high profile game released midway through the life of the PS1. Its 3D stealth action gameplay was a major innovation for the time. Snake's codec backup team was led by Colonel Campbell, a voice of military authority, but also included a Russian weapons expert who passionately argued for nuclear disarmament, a treacherous tutorial advisor who aids the player during the early stages before revealing himself as the main antagonist and a chatty morale officer who must be called in order to save the game, offering up a different Chinese proverb each time. Snake was opposed by a team of villains with animal codenames. The game was unlike anything else on the Playstation at the time, taking its players more seriously than they might expect, and surprising them consistently. Part of the surprise as the game unfolds is the realisation that the fourth wall is in constant flux. It starts out innocuously enough, with characters, especially the colonel, referring to the 'Action Button' and other controls in cut-scenes. Later on, a codec frequency needs to be discovered and tuned into in order to progress through the game, and after the player has searched for a while, Campbell will remark that "it should be printed on the CD case". The player needs to realise that he is referring to the CD case the game was packaged in rather than some diegetic object. Campbell is using the same matter-of-fact referral to non-diegetic objects as when referring to the Action Button, but suddenly because the textual machinery is not being directly referenced this has been construed as a fourth wall break. In fact it marks out an awareness of the player and the extra-diegetic game-space which comes to a head in the first 'Mantis' battle described

below, but lingers throughout the whole text. It also problematises the position of Snake relative to the gamer, since the advice is being given directly to Snake inside the fourth wall to be taken by the gamer on the outside. This is expanded upon late on in the game during a scene where Snake is tortured by the villain 'Ocelot' with electric shocks. The player needs to hammer on the X button to resist submitting to the torture. This is an important scene which determines the outcome of the narrative between two different possible endings, though the player does not know this at the time. Prior to the first bout of torture Ocelot goes through a monologue explaining Snake's predicament, remarking "oh, and don't even think about using auto-fire. I'll know!", referring to a popular feature on third-party control pads which mimicked the hammering of buttons. Because of all that has happened in the game so far, Ocelot's warning is a lot more likely to be heeded by the gamer, even though he's bluffing, and a detection feature was beyond the scope of the hardware to actually program into the game. Regardless of how the player performs in the torture resistance mini-game, between bouts Naomi, a doctor on Snake's codec offers the player a massage using the controller's vibration function to better prepare them for the next round. All of these features are making explicit the elements of games' relationship with the fourth wall discussed above, forcing the player to examine them and make some connection between them and the experience of playing *MGS*. This strategy, represents more than simply remediation, rather it is a thorough-going exploration of the particularity and potential of the medium of the videogame.
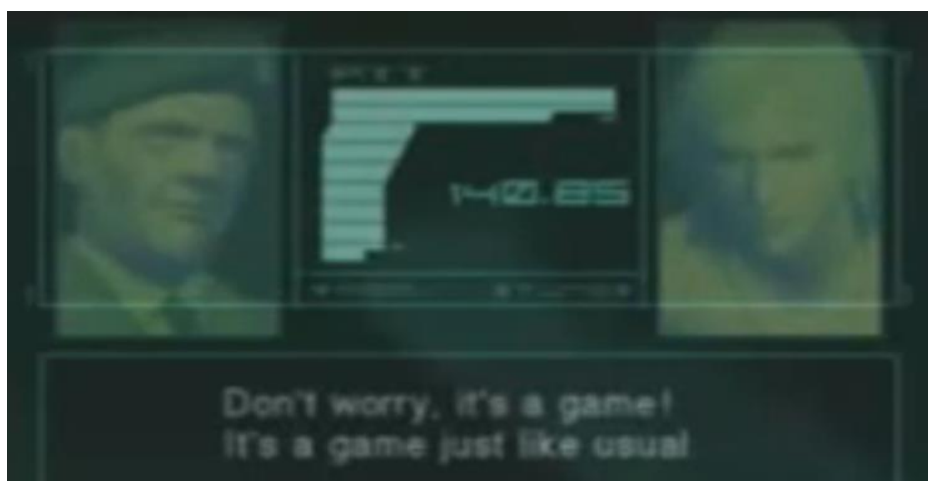
Fig.20 *"Don't worry, it's a game! It's a game just like usual!"*

Raiden's back-up team goes rogue on the player in MGS2

This confidence in the exploration of form is combined with the series' love of long cut-scenes shot like films, juxtaposing gameplay where the gamer is consistently jolted out of the viewer mentality that many other games strive to create with exposition sections where they can do little or nothing. The approach extends into *MGS2*, beginning with a mission where the player controls Snake after the events of *MGS1*, but upon successful completion changes the player-character for the majority of the game. This is revealed via a series of tutorial scenes that loosely follow the opening of *MGS1*, a formal ritual which persists through the series. The player's character moves through the first few tutorial levels still wearing a breathing mask, before eventually revealing himself to be a new character, Raiden. At time of release this was quite a shock, since the game had been promoted and sold with no mention of Raiden whatsoever, and his face only appears on the inside of the game box's inlay underneath the disc, all the other material implying that the player will be controlling Snake throughout. Kojima consciously set out to play this trick on players through the whole of the game's build-up, marketing and presentation, much like Hitchcock's famous management of the screenings of *Psycho*[42], showing the same awareness of the player's actual experience that Arsenault and Perron highlight by starting their game-reading model prior to the acquisition of the game to be played. *MGS2* has a complex storyline focusing on trust, betrayal and things never being quite as they appear. The position of the gamer relative to the newcomer, Raiden, is made designedly awkward throughout.[43] A player who had completed the first game suddenly has a lot of privileged knowledge over the protagonist, who is mocked as a rookie by both Snake, who plays a supporting role, and the other codec advisers. Raiden as a narrative character is himself a kind of gamer, trained for war in virtual reality simulations, although his darker past as a child soldier emerges further on. Towards the game's final act Raiden is captured and imprisoned aboard 'Arsenal Gear', a warship controlled by a sinister AI. A strange sequence then begins in a self-referential exact copy of the torture room from *MGS1*. Naked and in danger, Raiden escapes, but while he does so the chief advisor, the Colonel, goes rogue and

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[42] Hitchcock did nearly all of the promotion for the movie himself, refused preview screenings to critics in order to preserve the plot, and cast the extremely famous actress Janet Leigh for what appeared to be the main role, featured her on all of the advertising materials and killed her off in the shower scene only a few scenes into the film. He also insisted on cinema managers preventing movie-goers from entering screenings late, to preserve the full effect of these meta-devices.

[43] This interesting dimension of affect is shot through the text and discussed at length in Tanner Higgin's(2010) excellent analysis of this title in the series.

starts to use game features to annoy or frustrate progress. Forcing audio cut-scenes that interrupt gameplay at irregular intervals, the Colonel repeats lines from previous games in the series, spouts nonsense or pleads with the player to turn off the game console: "Raiden, turn the game console off right now! The mission is a failure! Cut the power now!". As Raiden begins to succeed despite the bad advice, and regains some of his armaments, more formal features of the game start to turn against the player, faking a game-over sequence that reads 'fission mailed' instead of 'mission failed'.

This later section of *MGS2* is emphasising a theme of the dissonance between simulated 'VR', which functions as a training tool within the MGS games' diegesis[44], and actual gameplay. The ludic reality, the 'guts' of the game and its gameplay are displayed and emphasised in the wireframe VR simulations, but cloaked by the 'real' paraphernalia of the actual gameplay. This dissonance, where the game's ludic fundamentals press against the themes of the storyline is felt throughout the series but most keenly in *MGS2*, which lacks a 'Mantis' battle to bring it to a head as occurs in the other games in this half of the series. The result is that instead it creates an unusual, uncanny feeling in terms of gameplay feeling. An *MGS2* gamer cannot fail to be aware of their suspension of disbelief, and incorporating this feeling into the narrative may be part of *Metal Gear*'s strength at storytelling through the game medium.   *MGS2*'s eventual denouement is a good example of this, when it reveals that the game's entire plot was a simulacrum of *MGS*, with events generally matching up when looked at with hindsight, not least the team of villains mimicking the boss encounters of the previous title. Having fallen victim to this contrived manipulation, the victorious Raiden rejects the control of the military system he has accepted throughout the game, symbolically throwing away his dog-tags, which when focused in upon bear the player's own name and date of birth, the game's final dissonant twist.

MGS3 does not continue in this tone, functioning as a prequel to the series proper and beginning to tie together the plot for the final episode. Set during the Cold War, players control 'Naked Snake' in a jungle environment which focuses as much on survival as stealth. Characters with game-design inspired names that scream dissonance, such as 'The Boss' and 'Big Boss', come to the fore once again to have these seeming inconsistencies absorbed in a narrative which makes this material coherent. The fourth wall is tested in abundance

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[44] Even spawning a spin-off game *Metal Gear Solid: VR Missions* (Konami, PS1, 1999)

once again, as characters tell Snake to be careful how long he plays the game for, and his mentor advises directly "trust your instincts as a soldier, as a gamer!", clearly pointing to a bridge between Solid Snake's experiences and those of the player. Several characters from games further on in the timeline are seen as their younger selves, and killing any of them will force a game-over superimposed with the words 'temporal paradox'. The team of villains are named after emotions, an allegorical convention, and the second major encounter dealing with the fourth wall, 'The Sorrow' boss fight, is analysed below. Another boss battle includes some fourth wall testing elements; the sniper duel against centenarian boss 'The End' is a drawn out affair that could last several gaming sessions or become extremely frustrating. Partly to aid players truly stuck on this section, but also to surprise those who can't play very often, the game is programmed to have this boss die of old age once a week of real-time has passed. Several other small uses of the device also occur, including the possibility of loading into Snake's fever-dream if the player abandons him by saving while he is held captive, which plays like a completely different third-person melee zombie survival game. Convergence of game and film medias are re-imagined as gameplay mechanics. A long scene involves the player having to hold down a single button to make Snake climb a ladder as the game enters its final act, during which the game's entire Bond-movie inspired theme song is played. Later, the time limit on the final boss encounter is not shown on the screen but instead implicitly signalled via the same song's playing in the background. The explicit connection, the low intensity of disbelief upheld between Snake and the gamer persists alongside these more implicit touches. After Snake has his eye torn out during a torture scene, the gamer is the one who finds aiming more difficult, as first-person views used for accuracy are thrown off-kilter from this point onwards. At the last this closeness makes its presence felt when, after finally besting The Boss, his mentor and mother figure in single combat, Snake has to kill her to complete his mission. The camera lingers on The Boss as she lies prone and the cut-scene waits for the player's trigger input, the screen's 'letterboxing' being the only prompting, to deliver the coup-de-grace.

The final canonical game in the series, *MGS4* has been helpfully examined by James Paul Gee, who pinpoints several examples and hones in at one point on the elements we discuss with an observation relevant to the entire series:

No matter why Mr. Kojima is throwing muck on the non-existent camera, he is surely telling us to pay attention to the signs: to the rain and ice on the camera. He wants us to see that these signs signal the fact that this is all artificial, not real, not a transparent window onto the world, even a fantasy world. It's a video game pretending to be a movie, knowing all the while it's a video game. (2009 p.267-268)

This confidence in the use of form, this self –referential, self-assured ambition characterises the series' final chapter, which constantly challenges the gamer to read it as more than both game and movie. The game opens after the 'new game' option is selected with what appears to be a cut-scene but, upon input, turns out to be a selection of TV shows the player can channel-surf between. Snake uses a Playstation 3 pad to control a mechanical sidekick, and when characters discuss how previous wars felt like games the boxes of the previous titles in the series fade in. This ludic incarnation of Snake blends in with his surroundings automatically, and the player can eventually morph him into all manner of characters. Identities morph and shift too, hybridity is everywhere. The team of villains in this entry of the series each take an animal codename from *MGS1*'s villain team, a weapon from those of *MGS2* and a second name from the emotions *MGS3* named its bosses after, leading to such constructions as Laughing Octopus and Raging Raven. The third major fourth wall breaking boss fight is with Screaming Mantis, analysed below.

The entire series plot is laid to rest in this instalment through a revisiting of the location of *MGS1*, where the graphical quality reverts to that of the PS1 and Snake is given a facemask of his previous console generation self to wear. The story itself concerns control and what it means to be able to puppeteer or influence events from the shadows, questioning the nature of the relationship between Snake, controlled through the shadows of the imagination, and everyone else, who seems to be constantly manipulated by other shadowy figures. There are dozens of other instances of the fourth wall being toyed with, director's cameos and challenging of diegetic assumptions, many of which are noted by Gee in his reading.

Fig. 21 *Wearing your own face from a*
previous console generation in MGS4

Throughout the game it is possible to buy guns and ammunition directly with 'Drebin Points'
earned for collecting items, and this is done instantly via the game interface, a fundamental
part of the use of grammar unique to *MGS4*. An interesting scene just prior to the finale
parodies this, when the vital absurdity of the game as a narrative form is brought to light, if
only for a moment. Two characters, Meryl and Johnny, are facing off against an oncoming
horde of enemy soldiers. Close up shots of their worried faces are juxtaposed with overhead
shots   of the number of enemies they are up against. The use of film grammar has told the
viewer unequivocally that there is no ammo left, only for Johnny to throw Meryl three full
magazines, out of nowhere! "Don't worry. I got these from Drebin." Johnny explains.
Naturally, the grammar of *MGS4* is shown to overrule the grammar of film, even during a
cut-scene.

Fig.22 "Don't worry. I got these from Drebin." Johnny comes to the rescue through the grammar of MGS4.

Not long after this scene, the final battle between Snake and his nemesis Liquid Ocelot, who has also gradually evolved multiple identities as he survived all the previous games in the series involves a stripping away of these different layers as the interface morphs from that of *MGS1* through all of the intervening games to *MGS4*, evolving to put the entire weight of the series storyline into play in the last fight. The game was marketed with and occasionally features the tagline "No place for Hideo", an awkward tagline that like much else in the game morphs in meaning throughout, sometimes seeming simply a comment on the level in front of the player, sometimes like the director's comment on modern videogaming, and sometimes like a bastardised version of 'nowhere to hide', which seemed to be how it was used in the press events leading up to the launch of the game. Another potential meaning of this cryptic phrase can be found if one reads the evolution of the series most explicit fourth-wall breaking moments the same way as it proscribes you read its final battle. This is best understood in the context of these fourth-wall testing encounters, which themselves are best described independently, one after another to best show how Kojima's fourth-wall

testing is actually a comment on, and signpost to, a unique element of the gamer's suspension of disbelief.

An evolving trope – the *Metal Gear Solid* Mantis Battles

Fig. 23 Suspend your disbelief...or else! The fourth wall breaking bosses from left to right:

MGS1's *Psycho Mantis*, MGS3's *The Sorrow* and MGS4's *Screaming Mantis*

The Mantis battles are the moments *MGS* and Kojima compel the player to observe the different construction of the fourth wall, forcing him to look in the mirror and admit the difference of this narrative experience to that of other media. It is a strengthened, focused take on the tone Gee (2009 p.268) notes of *MGS4*:

> The signs that you are playing a game are rubbed in your face. You are told not to forget that you are playing a video game, not to mistake it for reality any more than you should mistake those movie like cut-scenes for reality

Each Mantis battle makes up a memorable moment not only in the series but also in the history of gaming. The renewal of the *Metal Gear* franchise on PSX, PS2 and PS3 was set up as a series of blockbuster titles. Marketed heavily by both publisher Konami and hardware manufacturer Sony, the games were touchstones for each of these consoles, examples of what could be done pushing the boundaries of the medium. Hugely successful both in Japan and the west, the series is marketed directly to game fans, and as such Snake is not nearly as pervasive or emblematic of games outside of game fan-culturess in comparison with Mario

or Lara Croft. Kojima's series and his hero are creations of games and for gamers, and the Mantis battles underscore this distinction, burning it into the collective memory of the gaming community at large. Often, the first Mantis battle is brought up by theorists (Poole, 2000, Galloway, 2006, Conway, 2010) as the primary example of the breaking of the fourth wall in videogames. The second and third battles also do this, but gradually evolve the concept. All three show the development of Kojima's vision of how the fourth wall should function in games, and, I would argue, a growing disillusionment with the devices it showcases being taken up as gimmicks rather than observed as an element of the form.

The Mantis battles can be easily summarised, but it is vital to bear in mind the position and context they take up in the text. I have attempted, to frame the individual games which contain these encounters, their thematic concerns and their approach to the fourth wall in particular in the preceding section because this context of the climate of the games and the world of *MGS* is so important. It is also key to bear in mind that the player has to be assumed to come to these encounters 'cold', without having read a strategy guide, played the game before or cheated in some way. These stipulations might echo Coleridge's prescriptive domination of the reader, but readers are less of a concern in this analysis than designers, who occupy a different position to standard authors. A designer has to build an encounter for a 'cold' player and cannot make assumptions regarding anything they might have experienced outside of the elements of the experience he has already had them move through. It is not so different to mystery writers not writing for readers who skip to the end to discover the guilty party, or suspense films making the most of each moment for emotional impact and effect. Ironically, Kojima even already legislates for these unconventional gamers in some respects, Ocelot's telling "Don't even think about using Auto-fire. I'll know." during the torture scene in *MGS* bears testament to this and shares some of its effect with that of Coleridge's prefaces. When we analyse or summarise the designed experience, as academic critics we have to assume the player comes to it in good faith. With this said, the following summaries of encounters should appear less like tricks or toying with the text and more as moments framed within the context of the broader gaming experience.

The first Mantis battle occurs around one third of the way through *MGS* and happens fairly suddenly. Reunited with love interest Meryl, Snake opens a door and comes across a

member of the villainous team described in the game's introduction, Psycho Mantis. Hovering above the ground, wearing a gas mask and speaking in an eerie, high-pitched Russian accent, Mantis looks unusual even for *MGS*. The ability to fly is shared by all the Mantis battle bosses, and as far as the diegesis is concerned they are genuinely powerful psychics. Mantis takes control of Meryl, drawing her away from Snake, and introduces himself. This introduction scene, rather than the battle itself, is what is taken up by critics as a prime example of a game breaking the fourth wall. Mantis performs three gambits in a non-interactive sequence which prefaces the fight and functions as a hint that this is no run-of-the-mill boss encounter. Claiming to be an incredible psychic, Mantis begins to read Snake's mind. What he finds there are not the memories of the character, but data based upon how the player has been playing the game. Several responses are possible here. "You are a cautious man. You save often!", " You have not saved often, you are reckless!". Thus far, given the way *MGS* treats its own relationship with diegesis, Mantis could well have been speaking directly to Snake. Conversations about saving and encouragements to save regularly have been common occurrences. The second segment of Mantis's introduction changes this. "Ah, you like *Suikoden*!" Mantis exclaims, scanning the system's memory card for save data relating to other games published by Konami. Mantis will skip this step if there is nothing there to read, or announce several games if the player is a big Konami fan. This moment brings home that Mantis is aware of the system and potentially speaking to the player as well as to Snake, holding privileged information about games very different to *MGS*. The final gambit is Mantis speaking directly to the gamer, telling them "Put your controller down on the floor. Put it down as flat as you can...that's good." The vibration function built into all Playstation pads is then used to move the pad left and right on a flat surface as Mantis cackles about the scope of his powers. Exclaiming "This is no trick! This is *true power!"* Mantis could be channelling Kojima as any semblance of a traditional fourth wall falls away.

After the gambits, Mantis attacks and begins a three phase boss fight. Snake can radio for advice from his team and needs to isolate and exploit the enemy's weakness while defending against his attacks. In this case he also has to protect Meryl, whose health bar is displayed below his own. Mantis doesn't pose much of a threat at first, levitating furniture around the room and throwing it at Snake, who needs to dodge. Periodically the screen

goes blank and mimics a flicker effect common to televisions at the time of release. The game image is then replaced with a black screen showing 'HIDE0' in the top right hand corner, again mimicking how televisions of the period distinguished their AV mode from tuned channels, something a player setting up a system would have to be familiar with. This is the first example of the director's name being deployed in one of *MGS*'s direct fourth wall breaks. 'HIDE0', an auteur cameo here refers simultaneously to the director, another form of self-reference on the part of the text, and also a clue to the role of this mechanic in the boss fight. The image is being hidden. As a cheeky director's cameo, it also appeals to fans who might know the name of the director, something that cannot be taken for granted in games, not to adjust their set. It encourages players, as all the elements that break the fourth wall so far in this encounter have, to take this new element of the text in their stride and continue to suspend their disbelief. Gameplay continues behind this periodic shroud, and Snake might have taken some damage while the player was blinded. Mantis will easily dodge any weapon Snake uses, flitting out of the way of bullets while reminding Snake resistance is futile since he can read his mind. He will mind-control Meryl in a brief cut-scene, causing her to start shooting herself in the head. Meryl responds to all the usual gadgets that Snake has access to, and needs to be somehow stunned to prevent her from harming herself.

Calling for help yields panicked and confused responses from Snake's teammates at first, but eventually they'll reveal the actions necessary to take on Mantis at his own game. Galloway tongue firmly in cheek, calls this moment "The most grievous violation of the diegetic illusion" (2006, p.35),. The controller has to be taken out of port one and plugged into port two on the console in order to confuse Mantis and stop his dodging. He becomes frustrated and vulnerable, easily defeated with almost any weapon. The death of Mantis yields a long cut-scene which bridges the player back to normal gameplay.

The first Mantis battle is the critical touchstone for fourth wall breaks in videogames. Conway (2010) uses this moment as one of his several examples of a game breaking the fourth wall. Galloway goes on to deconstruct it as follows:

> *Metal Gear Solid* celebrates this inside-outside agitation with the boss Psycho
>
> Mantis. ... This brief moment of unplay does not destroy the game but in fact

elevates it to a higher form of play. Even if the player does not believe that Mantis is a true psychic, the use of nondiegetic machine acts, - requiring, in response, a nondiegetic operator act to continue playing – remains effective precisely because it follows the loop of supplementarity described in Derrida. The narrative follows faithfully enough to explain breaking the diegesis, and after the short diversion the player is safely returned to normal gameplay. Several other narrative games such as *Max Payne* contain similar 'Mantis moments', where the game deliberately breaks the fourth wall. (2006, p. 35)

Noting a kind of enforced suspension of disbelief in the 'requirement' of a safe return to normality, Galloway seems to needlessly defend the narrative's re-coherence. This is an unnecessary departure since the narrative is cohesive with the gameplay, highlighting the importance of understanding the Mantis moment as existing within the context of the *MGS* grammar. Poole deploys it as part of a broader move against 'interactive storytelling' :

Metal Gear Solid's true brilliance lies in its touches of humorous self-consciousness. It knows it's a game. ... Such clever devices ensure that the player is a happy slave: though he has no freedom to change the story, he has a lot of freedom in the gameplay itself, where many different creative solutions can be found to the game's problems. The unique pleasure of a videogame, after all, the one that no other medium can offer, is always going to be what happens *between* the episodes of the story. (2000, p.122)

The two citations latch onto the surprising effectiveness of the fourth wall break both as an unexpected break from the norm and a narrato-ludic device. Poole's 'happy slave' can be seen as the gamer whose suspension of disbelief is vindicated, or empowered in some way via the fourth wall. But the device is actually accomplishing more than this. The game is aware that you're playing a game, and invites you into the experience on an unusual but also very familiar level. The game, as well as its diegesis, is aware of you. Realising this momentarily allows the gamer to become empowered to see the entire act of gameplay as diegetic, since he himself has just been diegetically tapped on the shoulder by the text. Conway would characterise this as an expansion of the Magic Circle, but it is slight, and sudden, and does not persist in the ludodiegesis (term defined in Pinchbeck,

2007).However, while it does not live on in the text (highlighting the 'expansion' metaphor's own unwieldiness), it may echo in the player's mind, causing a change in the intensity of and approach to suspension of disbelief. This can allow the gamer to become something less of Poole's 'slave' and something more of Coleridge's dreamer, and Kojima is emphatically making an explicit statement that *this* is the way in which games should be read. Galloway even goes so far as to rudimentarily connect the effects of the first Mantis battle's 'active' (to use Galloway's own term, which chimes quite well with Holland's use of the word as described in chapter four) breaking of the fourth wall with less active 'Mantis moments' in other games. The elevation 'to a higher form of play' Galloway observes and the 'clever devices' that Poole makes reference to are affecting the player's suspension of disbelief directly. They draw it into the spotlight and, because of the novelty to some degree, but also because of the location of the gameplay experience being highlighted, make explicit the difference and distance from the other mode of engagement implicitly in play; the structure of the Hollywood movie. Both authors grapple with the elements that make this up, but are concerned with using the example for very specific purposes. Suspension of disbelief operating differently in games bolsters both authors' arguments. The audience having to engage in a fundamentally different way hands interpretative value to gameplay and erodes the 'interactive storytelling' manifesto Poole rails against. By the same token, the tacit disavowal of the other mode of engagement on offer, namely film, lends credence to Galloway's refocusing upon the machine's role in the experience, as he sums up:

> the play of the nondiegetic machine act is therefore a play within the various semiotic layers of the videogame. It is form playing with other form. (2006, p.36)

The missing element of the experience that Mantis is a touchstone for is the player's suspension of disbelief rather than a traditional fourth wall break. The shock of the perceived break is simply what heralds the encouragement to shift a player's viewpoint. Kojima came to terms with this aspect of his vision more quickly than his fans, the media or even academic commentators, and the following Mantis battles show a recasting of the 'Mantis moment' to explicitly refocus player attention on the ends rather than the means, away from the device of the fourth wall, and towards the ludic suspension of disbelief. Understanding how the effect develops through the second and third Mantis moments will

help to contextualise Kojima's use of the device and shed more light on how the fourth wall break as a device is complicated by this use of game grammar.

The second Mantis battle takes place around three quarters of the way into *MGS3*. Once again it happens without warning. Snake is knocked out on a cliff edge and then suddenly finds himself waist deep in water walking down a river. A ghostly figure manifests in front of him and introduces himself as 'The Sorrow'. Telling Snake 'the dead are not silent', he hovers in front of him, beginning a boss encounter that comprises a ten minute long sombre trudge upriver. The Sorrow has a health bar like other bosses, but it is empty. He is a spirit, so shooting him has no effect. He fires the occasional projectile at Snake but it is easy to dodge, and even if it hits all that occurs is a white-out of the screen with a superimposed screaming face. As Snake walks up the river, the ghosts of everyone he has killed up to this point in the game walk down. The strangled ghosts' heads loll back and the gunshot wounded ghosts stagger forwards clutching their chests. Since violence is always an option rather than a necessity in the *MGS* games, this could potentially be a very busy section or completely uneventful. Since killing is cast through narrative features as Snake's very last resort, warned against by his backup team and discussed with reverence by Snake himself, the player who had listened to Snake and given the narrative its due would have thought twice before pulling the trigger. Ludic features such as the game's score ranking system also encourage non-violence, speed and ammo conservation being consistently rewarded while detections, kills and saving the game are punished. The more deaths the player has inflicted, the harder this section becomes. Diegetic violence, so often the easy way out of situations in stealth action games, is now brought to bear on the player, and the consequences of the agency they have enacted through Snake revisited. Dodging and weaving will be necessary if the player has been on a killing spree, and this in turn makes The Sorrow's attacks become a lot harder to avoid. Any attempt to call on the backup team will only lead to hearing their reactions to Snake's supposed death. The grisly parade provides a unique commentary on a player's record visually rather than just touching upon it as the first Mantis did when he read the memory card, or seeing it as a stat at the end of the game. After the last ghost moves past, The Sorrow demands 'go back to your world!', 'wake up!', and drains Snake's health in a single blow, triggering the game over screen. The player can select 'continue' and restart from the last save, or 'quit' and return to the title

screen as usual, but other game controls remain live for a while, and Snake's inventory can still be opened. To return to the world of the living, players need to realise this in time and use a 'revival pill', which, paired up with a fake death pill, forms part of Snake's usual arsenal for avoiding detection by guards. Defeating The Sorrow requires the gamer to grasp the situation and then overrule the interface, one remove closer to the text than the overruling of hardware required by the first Mantis battle.

The fourth wall breaks in this boss battle are more subtle than against Psycho Mantis. The characters may not be directly aware of the player, but the game is shown to respond to extra-diegetic input dynamically, and then expect the same awareness from the player to complete the encounter. Rather than soliciting shock value to make the gamer respect the text and his own role in the experience, this encounter takes the respect as read and displays consequences often unconsidered by gamers because of assumptions commonly made of the medium. The consequences of the gamer's actions literally coming back to haunt Snake also brings up a new level of connection with his character, which will later be exploited by the series narrative by revealing this particular protagonist is actually the series' main antagonist. This narrative ducking certainly keys players into some of the responsibilities of the suspension of disbelief that games can bring to the fore. As with the first Mantis battle it deepens the story's themes by highlighting the gamer's responsibility for the narrative as played experience through a focus on the suspension of disbelief. The final test of not trusting the game interface, overruling the game over screen, is the vindication sought by the designer that the gamer understands there is a message behind the game's suddenly not playing by the rules. The gamer, as well as Snake, needs to 'wake up!'. In *MGS2* we see the 'Mantis moment' recreated as a more contemplative questioning of the gamer's take on the storyline and responsibility for playing along with the narrative, the 'spirit' of the game.

MGS4 is the final canonical entry in the series and wraps up all the plotlines. It seems fitting that its Mantis battle be the culmination of Kojima's experimentation as well. As described above, *MGS4* twists the fourth wall to become more self-referential in terms of both the director and the games that have gone before. Screaming Mantis, the last boss of the game proper, hovers without the use of a jetpack and is modelled after a puppeteer, holding marionettes of Psycho Mantis and The Sorrow. Meryl is once again with Snake, and once

again Mantis will try to make her kill herself in a mimicry of the *MGS* encounter. The one difference in the opening cut-scene gives away this boss's weakness. This time around in the designedly familiar scene, we can see the strings. Gossamer-like threads are emphasised as Meryl is puppeteered. Psycho Mantis's ghost hovers over the boss and he speaks through her as flashbacks of his old incarnation fade in and out. The gameplay of the boss fight is a fusion of the two previous encounters as well, as jerking corpses controlled by the same strings lurch towards Snake. The gamer who follows Conway's logic and pre-empts the shifting of the fourth wall can attempt a re-assigning of the controller, the closest thing to emulating the technique used to win in the *MGS1* fight. Snake's old backup team even advise this option. "Snake, try using the same tactic again! Plug the controller into port two…" However, since there are no controller ports on a PS3 this action leads to a loss of player control and a desperate codec message from Otacon: "What, you can't Move? What the heck did you…oh, Snake, did you set the controller number to something other than 1?". The trick to beating this Mantis lies resolutely inside the diegesis. It turns out Mantis is not psychic, but rather manipulating the nano-machines which the vast majority of characters in the *MGS4* world are implanted with. Her psychic powers are entirely mechanical, mundanely diegetic. Snake has received an 'antidote' to the nano-machines earlier on in the story, and must use this to resist Mantis's powers. Prior to doing this, a similar 'Hide02' moment and a fake reset which displays an altered Kojima Productions logo that reads 'Kojima Protection' can be triggered, but afterwards both the player and Snake are immune. Shooting the marionettes from her hands, the player must take up these symbols of the previous games' extra-diegetic gameplay features and use them to defeat Mantis. Screaming Mantis is a symbol of the gamer, a disembodied, godlike figure hovering above a world she is divorced from and yet in total control of. Snake must divest her of her own input devices, which leaves her helpless.

There is no fourth wall break, and Kojima's comment becomes clear in the cut-scene upon the completion of the encounter, when the angry ghost of Psycho Mantis ascends from the corpse of Screaming Mantis and attempts to replay the *MGS1* introduction scene. The famous line "that's right, this is no trick, it is true power!" repeats, but there is no memory card for him to read in a PS3. "What! Where's your data? Where is it saved? There's no memory card!" he exclaims as a shot of a PS1 fades in using the same cues as previous

flashbacks. If the player is using a standard Ps3 controller, he adds the line "what! No vibration either?!", as his spirit floats away, quite literally exorcised by the text. Grating self-reference far more candid and transparent than at any point previously accompanies all this and empowers this debunking of the fourth wall break for comic effect, degenerating into farce . We hear a disembodied Naomi say 'no more massages for you!', after Mantis comments "your skills have improved, or rather...your hardware". All these moments together emphasise that the fourth wall break in *this* final Mantis battle was the realisation that there were no tricks involved, and the message, delivered through nested, Oroborous-like self reference of self-reference, was that the device in itself is worthless if the gamer has come to expect it. This is how we can solve Kojima's riddle. 'No place for Hideo' was referring to the gambit exemplified by Psycho Mantis's taking over the screen to display the Hide0 channel being exhausted, since its primary shock value no longer exists. Making the player win by killing this figure of the gamer with her own controllers seems to symbolise this frustration completely. This could also be read as a triumphant moment for the series and Kojima, 'no place for Hideo' meaning that MGS gamers are now so keyed into the way to suspend their disbelief, at least in these games, that they no longer need to be shocked into it.

The three Mantis battles bear the very personal signatures of Kojima. The first displays his name, the second plays out his ideology while the third utilises direct intertextuality, featuring reappearances of both Psycho Mantis and The Sorrow. To some extent the invulnerable, floating Mantises who change the rules and need to be combated both in and outside the diegesis become totemic of the game designer when their mechanics expose a fourth wall of convenience and make the gamer confront herself in Snake. These are heavily authored moments of communication, where the director is asking the player to sit up and take notice. As boss battles they are a conversation between Kojima and the gamer, a junction between auteur design and the suspension of disbelief via the fourth wall. *MGS4* is the end of the series, and its Mantis battle demonstrates Kojima's coming clean to the gamer. Anticipating demands for the fourth-wall breaking action, the player is punished for assuming the solution to the puzzle lies outside the diegesis. This final Mantis battle celebrates the fourth wall breaks of the past titles through intertextuality, pre-empting the player at every turn. This reaches its apotheosis in the 'I bought it from Drebin' scene

described above, which occurs immediately afterwards. With the same 'celebration' that Galloway first noted, delivered through all the tools of the medium from puzzles to punishment, the fourth wall break is shown not to be a device used to solicit cheap laughs or a sense of the uncanny. Rather, by putting the gamer in touch with how they suspend their disbelief in order to strengthen, fundamentally, their relationship with Snake, Kojima is swaddling what Ferri (2007 ch.7) defined as the new 'shadows of the imagination', contexts, around Coleridge's old definition of them as characters. Kojima is using construction of the grammar use of these games and their flashpoints in the Mantis moments to win fans and make his 'auteur' contribution to the medium. He is also putting forward a method of game-reading which suits his approach to narrative, but brings home truths about the suspension of disbelief in a ludic context to gamers via the medium. The solutions to both of our first two problems, the problem of the skilled reader (chapter three) and of fundamental activity (chapter four) are emphasised in a Mantis moment. Suspension of disbelief is shown to be working from a different location and the result of a willed disavowal of presence, as the fourth wall break sucks the player into the world rather than reminding them of the outside. Simultaneously, the way in which the experience is intensified rather than diluted is testament to the inflexible, mandatory nature of suspension of disbelief in games, and turns this awkward element into a virtue.

This impacts upon the problem of dissonance quite directly. It would be fair to say that, during these heightened moments, the ideal, or intended player moves from feeling immediate sympathy with Snake to feeling genuine empathy. The Mantis spaces are spaces where it is clearly telegraphed that no rules or assumptions can be taken for granted. Because of this, during a Mantis moment the corridor of disbelief between player and game is not made up of both allowances and assumptions, but needs to be comprised solely of allowances, which must themselves be challenged in order to succeed. This is fundamentally a reversal of the goals of the distancing effect as laid out in Farman's earlier citing of Brecht. In fact, reciprocal empathy, of a kind, is what's required to overcome these hurdles, and the activity of empathy in comparison with sympathy connects with Galloway's (2006) model of the gaming experience . It also throws into focus the importance of our first two conclusions on how suspension of disbelief works differently in games, laying bare the distance and difference between gamer and player-character, insisting on an acting out of this thesis' first

main conclusion: an imagining out of the gamer's self from the text. All three of these brief moments of heightened self-awareness were also illustrating fundamental activity. They show how the player is a fundamental part of any game-text by making their outside knowledge actions or considerations core to the experience while working against a simple 'total immersion' reading by expanding the diegesis, not the magic circle as Conway would have it, out from the game to incorporate the player, and doing this explicitly where other games try their hardest to obscure it. They all seek to show the player that they are part of the story, part of the experience independently of the rest of the text, to make plain what Salen and Zimmerman (2004) define as the 'double-consciousness of play'. Gee (2009) calls this the game's requiring that players work alongside it and 'be a good Snake' on various narrative and ludic levels. It seems that, once again, the device is bringing to light something more fundamental than just a facet of *MGS* games, signifying an approach to the problem of dissonance: these breaks make it clear that to suspend disbelief within the constraints of a game and its narrative diegesis, the gamer has to take on a role. The Mantis moment just makes it ludically efficient as well as advantageous to the narrative construction, if not absolutely necessary to do this.

Progression in the Mantis battles relies upon an acceptance by the gamer of our second conclusion, that the suspension of disbelief act is non-negotiable. Players are shown to be a part of the experience of the game and, whether they like it or not, a non-trivial component of the whole experience outside of, or in addition to, both the gameplay and the story. Attempts to lose oneself in a game or to be 'totally immersed' are actively shattered in the Mantis encounters, in fact this represents their manifesto when they are examined as case studies above. Their effect is the same 'deepening' which Murray noticed when discussing idle animations, the same 'elevation' to a higher form of play that Galloway points out, but placed in a context whereby its effects are prominent and long-lasting. Once gamers are made aware that MGS doesn't play by the rules of the cinematic fourth wall, they come to respect it in a way they'd respect neither game nor film, as a different media text altogether. This shift in mindset is forced by Kojima, but only makes explicit what is implicit in other games, from the perspective of both ludic and narrative tropes. These include the fundamental persistence of the player within the gameplay experience in the first Mantis battle, the necessity of context to allow for the functioning of rules in the second, and the

role-playing that is shown to have been always symbolically active when the gamer/character/Snake disempowers the figure of the gamer in the third.

Forum threads regarding The Sorrow are posted by frustrated players who have restarted the sequence multiple times looking for the gameplay 'trick' to beat this boss, and are suffering. Conway (2010) notes similar moments with regard to *Eternal Darkness*'s equating the game system's correct functionality with the character's mental health. These frustrated or inexperienced players who cannot see the potential for a fourth wall break, or take the fake ending screen or glitches-by-design for the real thing are 'stuck' just as a player with insufficient hand-eye co-ordination would be stuck at a high level of *Lumines* or *Space Invaders*. All of a sudden, Eskelinen's (2001) ball *is* telling stories, and the stories are changing the rules of the game. The device which was held up as a demonstration of the insoluble problem of ludo-narrative dissonance is proving in these moments that the right sort of approach, the ludic suspension of disbelief, can begin to overcome and enhance both key elements of the text. Narrative is now returned to the fold as the connection linking players back into this uncooperative text. Narrative elements which have masked game features or smoothed their use of grammar are deployed in a topsy-turvy fashion here when, in the first Mantis battle, gamers need to visualise their gameplay through the narrative lens placed before them in order to make the necessary connections and progress. To use Eskelinen's terms, the narrative, riddled, component of the experience enables and demands configurative practice. In the second Mantis battle, narrative elements act as a touchstone (through the suicide pill) to reconnect the gamer and defibrillate the seemingly dead text. The third Mantis battle actively deploys narrative elements against a supposed informed gamer, while the uninformed or those who haven't paid enough attention to the diegesis are punished for their assumption that a fourth wall break would be heavily telegraphed.

The Game-Playing Role - Solving the problem of dissonance.

Waern's conclusion regarding *Sanningen om Marika*, the runaway ARG which caused trouble in a similar vein to Orson Welles' infamous broadcast adaptation of *The War of the Worlds* in 1938, where people actually thought that the fictive paraphernalia was real, was that players had misinterpreted the game's core rule: 'pretend that it is real'

Most participants who embraced the fictional nature of *SOM* felt empowered by the game...We believe that this experience was available only for people who understood the fictional nature of the main storyline, and adopted the 'pretend that it is real' instruction as an invitation to role-play. These players were able to immerse in pretence play, but also to appreciate that some of their activities were real. (2009 p.7)

We have seen through this chapter's many examples and deconstruction of tropes, encounters and mechanics that moments in videogames which appear to create an effect similar to that of the breaking of the fourth wall in theatre or film are pointing in the direction of the same 'invitation' Waern marks out. Suspension of disbelief *feels* reshaped by these fourth wall breaks, which remind the gamer of his independence and distinction from the rest of the gaming experience, but also allow this knowledge to enable a re-immersion in a more potent way. However these aren't any different from other games in formal terms. When placed in the situation exemplified by a Mantis moment where the player has no option in order to progress but to set aside the comforting fiction of total immersion or the equally comforting and equally untrue fiction of total control over the text from outside, and has to take responsibility for their role in the text. This opportunity to reconcile themselves with the game on its own terms enables a deeper form of immersion, a true, and in many ways a familiar 'willing suspension of disbelief' is on offer from this place inside of the text. This is a suspension of disbelief which encourages the generation of empathy rather than sympathy, since it comes from a place where the gamer's own identity is claimed and assured by the space. The deeper relationships offered through a more empathic connection with characters are encouraged through the ludic form alone but empowered through the difference in its suspension of disbelief. Creating this special connection with Snake, an empathic rather than sympathetic connection, is Kojima's goal through the use of the devices we've described. It is the optional taking up of a role, the player stepping into the forgiving, allowing, enabling, 'pretend that it is real' gamer-role that allows for this. Every game will have its own spin on this position, informed by the shape of its internal use of game grammar. Ryan's position on suspension of disbelief seems completely out of sync with modern videogames in this light:

But why should the synthesis of immersion and interactivity matter so much for aesthetic philosophy? In its literal sense, immersion is a corporeal experience, and as I have hinted, it takes the projection of a virtual body, or even better, the participation of the actual one, to feel integrated in an art-world. On the other hand, if interactivity is conceived as the appreciator's engagement in a play of signification that takes place on the level of signs rather than things and of words rather than worlds, it is a purely cerebral involvement with the text that downplays emotions, curiosity about what will happen next, and the resonance of the text with personal memories of places and people. (2003 p.21)

The personalising offered and occasionally required by the fourth wall break's relationship to players' assumptions and allowances makes explicit that this personal connection shines through even when resisted by the way the text is engaged with. The avatar can be a character resolutely separate to the gamer, and yet through suspension of disbelief that same connection can be found, it needn't be sacrificed on the altar of narrative effectiveness or coherence. I believe this conclusion, the privileging of empathy over sympathy for ludic characters, is under-exploited in current game writing because of misunderstandings and incorrect approaches to the way audiences will suspend their disbelief.   Waern's invitation needs to be taken up, and the gamer, whose suspension of disbelief is forced by a combination of the realities of the text which lead to the willed disavowal of presence and a corridor of disbelief that can be exposed as fragile, does have a genuine choice in whether or not to make the most of the game-playing-role offered up by the text. A game-playing-role is being a 'good Snake' as Gee defines it in *MGS4*, but is equally possible in games which do not strive as wildly to make the decision so simple. Game-playing-roles share a lot in common both with elements of Heidegger's 'concernful seeing' as discussed in chapter four, and also with Miguel Sicart's concept of the 'virtuous player', defined as 'those player-subjects who have actually developed their ethical reasoning'. Sicart describes them in relation to *GTA: Vice City* and its 'prostitute' mechanic:

A player of this game ought to understand that what she is interacting with is a simulated urban American environment, heavily inspired by cinema clichés, where violence is the main means of interacting with the world and progressing in the game. Furthermore, the virtuous player…when performing the prostitute game

mechanic, should be aware that she is actually increasing her chances of passing a challenge by means of exchanging game tokens in the most efficient way. All of this is wrapped in a provoking simulation which the player understands is only meaningful within the game, because the meaning is related to the game system. (2009, p.197)

Sicart's concept is a highly evolved form of a game-playing-role, and defined from the perspective of ethics. We can begin to see more of its direct relevance to suspension of disbelief and immersion when Zagal deploys Sicart in his reading of the opening scenes of *Heavy Rain*, where the player controls a father playing toy sword-fights with his son. Playing the game 'correctly' and following its prompts means you beat the little boy every time, but playing from a game-playing-role or as a virtuous player means letting him win might be the right thing to do as a father:

> By Sicart's definition, the virtuous player (and father) should let the son win. However, in order to do so the player must resist the temptation to follow the game's on-screen's directions. The player must decide not to act instead of reacting. (2011 p.59)

The game-playing–role is a willing acceptance of the grammar-use of the world, warts and all, in pursuit of immersion and, as Coleridge noted when he defined suspension of disbelief, it is procured by both textual design *and* authorial desire, which is why it seems so familiar, so like the suspension of disbelief undertaken in other media. Zagal's example shows this does not need to mean that like its counterpart in traditional conceptions of suspension of disbelief, exemplified in our working definition in chapter two, it is disempowering. On the contrary, an awareness of a game-playing-role allows for the tuning of game mechanics to better suit one's own ends. He goes on to clarify and underline this:

> The meaning and agency that results from these non-actions isn't necessarily
>
> acknowledged by the game. Rather, it results from the player's interpretation and
>
> understanding of who the characters are, and what they should be doing. (ibid)

In no way is accepting a game-playing-role actively creating belief or trying to insert or impose oneself into the text, rather it is taking what is posited as real in the terms of the grammar use of the game *as* real, and being doubly surprised when the fourth wall shatters and re-forges the link between the gamer and the text. Seeing it as a role allows us to make use of Gary Alan Fine's (1983 ch.6) worthwhile application of Goffman's frame analysis to games, which results in the definition of three different levels of meaning, in the contexts of tabletop role-playing games: person, player and character. The role-playing consciousness, according to Fine, exists on all three of these levels simultaneously, although the personal level is not bound by the rules of the game, the player level is aware of them and the character level bound by them diegetically to the point where the character is a negotiated entity shared by the gamer and the designer/referee.   The role-player retains a consciousness of self outside the game at all times, in fact this self motivates and informs all decisions from the outset. This position when the game-playing-role is taken up is different to the player's initial position holding the control pad when playing the game and agreeing to be bound by the rules of the experience. Taking up the game-playing-role wills that body to become a tool for reading a game as enjoyably (in a narrative sense) and effectively as possible, moving from Fine's player level to character level. This occurs via the trigger of the willed disavowal of presence, our first conclusion which itself exists within the digital space of our second conclusion, where suspension of disbelief is in many ways mandatory. These two factors enable the softening of the problem of dissonance to the point where overcoming it becomes a choice made a lot easier for the gamer. The gamer taking up the game-playing-role is distinctly a different 'split self' than Iser's, which is "the role offered by the text" set against "the reader's own disposition"(Iser 1976 p.35) and would mirror the first two levels of Fine's model: Person and Player. Game-playing roles, by virtue of the solution to the problem of the skilled reader happen somewhere deeper, and by virtue of the solution to the problem of fundamental activity they could constitute offers that cannot be refused. Is this constitutive of what Suit's call the 'lusory attitude'?

The game-playing role and the lusory attitude

This chapter has described how a game-playing-role, a kind of fusion of Iser's second self, Gerrig's skilled reader and Fine's role-player can be observed to comprise an element of ludic environments' textual construction. It has also begun to observe how gamers' adoption of such roles enfolds aspects of the medium thrown into light through the differences in its fourth wall into our new conception of suspension of disbelief. What we have seen so far, though, is complicated by Suits' still relevant idea of the lusory attitude

In his logically organised and exhaustive definition of games, Suits makes it clear that a particular form of approach to a set of activities is necessary in order to turn them into a game. He defines the lusory attitude as follows:

> The attitude of the game player must be an element in game playing because there has to be an explanation of that curious state of affairs wherein one adopts rules which require one to employ worse rather than better means for reaching an end. ... I believe we are now in a position to define *lusory attitude*: the acceptance of constitutive rules just so the activity made possible by such acceptance can occur. (Suits 1978 p.38-40)

Suits is concerned with the bare bones of game-playing, as it relates to the definition of games. This thesis takes as read that games are texts, and is thus more concerned with meaning communication and the imagination, yet both his approach and our conclusions so far have touched upon a necessary shift in a gamer's perspective on or attitude towards interfacing with the text. This thesis is also concerned only with a subset of games, contemporary videogames, while Suits is more interested in a wider definition. These distinctions make much of the lusory attitude more of a broadly ludic concern, but its status as a cornerstone of the experience of gaming and its close connection to the game-playing-role makes it relevant. Arguably, because of the multitude of restrictions placed on a videogamer as opposed to the examples of chess players or track runners which Suits often makes use of, I claim here that the lusory attitude is not an option in modern videogames *in medias res*, but rather a mindset one settles into as they put in the disc or pick up the controller, bound by the solution to the problem of fundamental activity. The lusory attitude *must* persist to drive the whole experience, because short-cuts do exist in modern

videogames, they just do not have the same appearance as cutting across an infield or tipping over a chessboard. Crucially, Suits defence of the lusory attitude relative to those who do not explicitly want to play games, who make their living from them or play to 'make up the numbers', is that

> A player's acceptance of rules because 'such acceptance makes possible such activity' is the only reason he *must* have in playing a game. (ibid p.144)

Suits' lusory attitude is the central tenet of his definition of games being an inefficient, but pleasurable means to an end. Thus picking up the golf ball, cutting across the infield or tipping over the chessboard perforates the game as the lusory attitude is relinquished. The same could, arguably, be true of downloading a 100% complete save from the internet, modifying a joypad to make a tough game mechanic easier or reading a walkthrough to achieve the optimal outcome of a game's narrative. But when discussing gamers' suspension of disbelief we are concerned centrally with stories, characters, diegesis, readers and meanings. When the gamer is considered as a sort of reader, he certainly is seen to adopt a lusory attitude, but a story would never be defined the same way as Suits defines a game, since the meandering inefficiency of the game is the only way to reach its destination. It is ironic that a major criticism of narrative-driven games, especially third-person-action and RPG genres, is that they judder from gameplay action to narrative explication, thus functioning as not only an inefficient story but also a frustrating game. This serves only to aggravate the dissonance between the binding lusory attitude and the non-mandatory suspension of disbelief as required in other media, which gamers feel jolted back into when interactivity is taken away or restricted, and the trappings of another media come to the fore. The problem of dissonance can be seen as the disconnection between Suits lusory attitude and its *acceptance* of rules and Coleridge's willing *suspension* of disbelief. Switching between the two is not enjoyable since you're frequently jolted from gamer, a potentially agentic position inside the text enabled through a willed disavowal of presence, to reader, a rather less agentic position outside of the text brought about through a process of textual interfacing. The kinds of fourth wall manipulation discussed earlier in this chapter proof games against this dissonance and smooth it away to an extent by undermining other forms and emphasising games' complexity. *MGS* players are less likely to put down the controller during a long cut-scene, because they know the game doesn't play by the rules of the films

it often mimics. This is done more explicitly with quick-time-events as discussed in chapter one, although their blunt approach is less conducive to a game-playing role by generating dissonance within the game's own use of grammar. What both do is lend interactivity, or the potential for it, to non-interactive segments of games, and in so doing transfer the cast-iron requirement of the lusory attitude to these moments as well. They extend what Juul has defined as a 'level of abstraction': "the border between the content that is purely fictional and the content that is presented in the fiction as well as implemented in the rules of a game" which determines the point where the purely fictive and the fictive-ludic interlace (2007 p.511) These devices drag this line to the right by both fair means and foul.
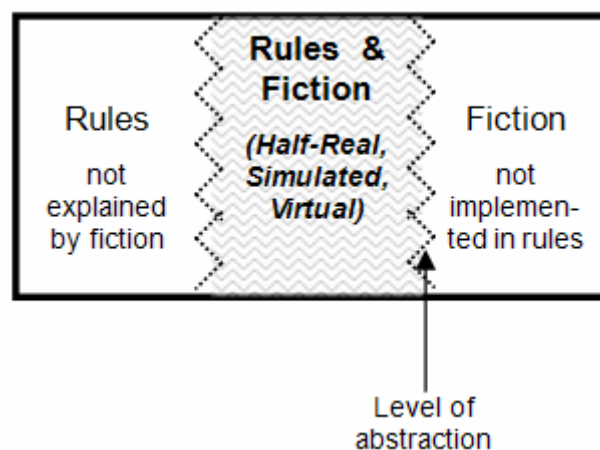

Fig.25 Juul's (2007) Diagram showing where the 'level of abstraction' lies in a given game.

For our purposes, the line is much more interesting in the terms of games' hermeneutics than their construction, since as it shifts, the problem of dissonance reduces in scope. This is why the fourth wall breaks seem to invite a *re*-immersion, seem to be plunging us deeper into a text. Game-playing roles are the psychological place where the lusory attitude is rehabilitated with the willing suspension of disbelief, and the more earnestly the game takes its own inviting of gamers to role-play, the easier entering into a game-playing-role will feel, up to the point where it's done by default and devices like fourth wall breaks are no longer achieving this same end, as Kojima makes clear in the Screaming Mantis denouement to a game series devoted to making the player take up a game-playing-role.

Since they characterise dissonance so completely, it is interesting how closely Suits' demand of 'acceptance' in order to play a game mirrors Coleridge's entreaty of 'suspension'. The two do merge, awkwardly, in role-playing. Happily, Suits discusses role-playing at length when

defending other elements of his definition, putting forwards two fictitious psychiatric cases of game-playing obsessives. Porphyryo Sneak, a superb impersonator and thus the greatest spy in the world, and Bartholemew Drag, a powerful man whose obsession with playing the many different roles at his disposal led to his 'delusions' being constantly pandered to by everyone around him. The former echoes some of the cases Kris (1952) describes in his account of suspension of disbelief, minus the game-playing. Both cases are presented independently to defend Suits' definition against criticism regarding its relevance to make-believe games. The conclusions Suits draws roll make-believe into the general definition by latching onto the fact that role-playing in games is not fundamentally about the roles played as such but rather the moves made. As he puts it:

> The important thing in a game of this kind is not that one assumes a character other than one's own, but that the moves one makes be good rather than bad – that is, moves which keep the game going instead of terminating the play. (Suits 1978 p.131)

The lusory attitude is shown to be the governing principle that makes role-play function from within ludic environments. Its requirement that the games of make believe continue is how suits completes the mock cases of Sneak and Drag's 'logical fallacies'. In an attempt to rehabilitate the two, Sneak is introduced to Drag and the dialogue proceeds as follows while the psychiatrist Heushrecke looks on:

> S:*(He produces a revolver)* ...Drag, I'm not afraid to use this! I want you to get up...and walk ahead of me out to the parking lot. There you will get into the driving seat of the grey Mercedes... After that, I'll tell you what to do.
>
> D: Very well, but first tell me who you really are.
>
> S: I am Porphyryo Sneak, a retired spy.
>
> D: I just wanted to be sure. And I, so we'll know where we are, am really Sanders of the FBI.
>
> S: Of course you are. Now move, Sanders! *(Sneak and Drag exit)*
>
> H: The prognosis is not good, it's excellent! (ibid, p.126)

The 'cure' for Sneak and Drag was a multiplayer game, playing with and relying upon each other to keep the role-play going forever. Each character needed others neither to humour them nor actually believe they were who they claimed to be, but rather to understand that they were playing a game. This required that those they were with not just suspend their disbelief, but suspend it taking into account the responsibilities of gameplay and ludic environments. Present in this moment when the two gamers are finally 'cured' are all three of the conclusions reached in this these, all three answers to the problems of the skilled reader, fundamental activity and dissonance. They each needed an acceptance that suspension of disbelief involved stepping back from the characters they were playing, was made mandatory in order to continue the play and could best be managed through the taking up of a game-playing-role. Suspension of disbelief is sought out and willingly given, albeit at gunpoint, by both parties. The example doesn't work without both Suits' 'acceptance', sought when Drag asks Sneak to verify that he's a game-player 'tell me who you really are', *and* Coleridge's 'suspension', shown in Drag's reply to Sneak 'so we'll know where we are' being present. The lusory attitude is shown to be what Suits always claimed it was, an element of how games are constructed, part of the mantle that is taken on when a gamer suspends disbelief rather than one and the same thing. The suspension of disbelief in games is not the lusory attitude because both are concerned with achieving different effects, but both can work in tandem within a game-playing-role to smooth off, if not solve, the problem of dissonance, and the game-playing-role solution is the only way in which games can be reconciled with other media forms This conclusion, like the lusory attitude, *does* privilege the ludic, just the same way as the ludic element of games takes primacy in the choose-your-own-adventure books or the uninspiring bifurcating films discussed in chapter one. This privileging of the ludic is why suspension of disbelief has to function in different ways in games, not why it is overwhelmed or pushed into the background by the adoption of the lusory attitude. But let us join Sneak and Drag as they venture off into the world of multiplayer games, and test our now completed three conclusions as we do so.

Conclusion

Over the course of this thesis several conclusions have been arrived at. The task now undertaken is to review these conclusions; a task informed by a review of the process of writing the thesis over such an extended period, where games and ideas have come and gone, evolved, transformed and mutated. To summarise, the previous three chapters looked in more depth at the problems of the skilled reader, fundamental activity and dissonance through investigations into games' textual construction, the mindsets they engender in players and their reformulation of the fourth wall. This thesis has arrived at a concept of suspension of disbelief for videogames which works in a different fashion to that originally proposed by Coleridge as the voluntary, temporary creation in response to textual stimuli of an imaginative space that transcends the text yet is constantly renewed through its progression (the definition which was arrived at in chapter two, page 87). The model proposed reinforces the gamer's self through degrees of restriction, in turn forcing them towards activity which needs must be correlated with the text. This results in an optional 'game-playing-role' which shares many similarities with Coleridge's original formulation, and when taken up acts to reduce the dissonance between gameplay and narrative. It's not so simple as saying the gamer suspends their disbelief from a different place, since the revised context changes much of the experience. This research was originally motivated mostly by the problem of dissonance, but looking at it as a whole I feel that the applicable conclusion, the connection of the lusory attitude with the suspension of disbelief, only rings true in the light of the other two supporting conclusions. In fact, each one reinforces the others, and this conclusion, longer than is usual because it builds upon the earlier conclusions arrived at, will examine these synergies before weaving the conclusions together.

Conclusion one: In games, suspending disbelief in character involves stepping back

It's as a cruel paradox that the high-resolution graphics and excellent direction of modern games such as *Killzone 2* (Guerrilla Games, 2009) or *Crysis* (Crytek, 2007), which have some of the highest fidelity visuals ever created are in fact more susceptible to the 'uncanny valley' (Mori, 1970) effect, where their characters require a leap of poetic faith to be taken as real, than their less polished competitors or predecessors. In games, the uncanny valley needs to be traversed via a form of suspension of disbelief very different from that which

movies, even all-CGI movies presenting 'digital actors' such as *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within* (Hironobu Sakaguchi, 2001) , or *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009) solicit. Movies want viewers to voluntarily forget that the actor on the screen is pretending to be a character and the set around them has limits and scope created through advanced visual trickery, in short to accept that the world presented to us on the screen is subject to the same 'rules' as our reality. This baseline will then be modified by the effects of the action that follows. The game seeks something different of its 'skilled' readers. The limitations of the world inhabited by characters will inevitably be made apparent at some point, even if they are not immediately given away at the beginning of the game. Some of its restrictions must be re-imagined as challenges to be overcome. The 'uncanny valley' that needs to be crossed when we see the CGI game character as opposed to the CGI movie character is accepting them as a denizen of the world with potential access to the same agencies as the player, in short that the character presented to us on the screen is subject to the same rules that bind our locus of identity in the game world. We're still seeing that both characters could be 'a real person, like me', but from two very different perspectives. This holds true obviously for characters presented *as* a locus, but also for characters presented alongside a locus as part of a narrative and characters or entities in games where the locus is not directly embodied within the game.

Kojima's 'Mantis battle' device is the exception that sets out to prove this rule, experimenting with a character type which exploits the ludic form of the suspension of disbelief in *MGS's* 'Psycho Mantis' and *MGS3*'s 'The Sorrow' encounters and displaying how valueless the effect is when it comes to be expected in *MGS4*'s 'Screaming Mantis' battle. Because of the distinction of how gamers suspend their disbelief in games compared to other media, attempts at breaking the fourth wall in the traditional fashion work the opposite way, galvanising the text as fiction and bringing the audience closer to that fiction by reminding the gamer of his dual role as enforced motivator and optional game-playing-role-player. Both fourth wall breaks operate by throwing the suspension of disbelief into light and questioning its position relative to the fiction presented in the text. The effect of this in games is to enhance the coherency of the text and the potential quality of the fiction by emphasising the division between gamer and played character. The device works backwards since suspension of disbelief in videogames works almost in reverse, and

requires stepping back, a willed disavowal of presence. The only way Kojima can bring his audience closer to feeling what Snake feels is by shining a spotlight on their distance from one another.

In *The Sims* the player's locus is less opaque than in the other character driven examples, with the player being represented more as a force than as an avatar, reinforced through the use of isometric perspective, but the presentation of characters still requires the same suspension of disbelief. When a newly controllable character enters the game, say, through a child growing out of the baby stage and into the toddler stage, the player needs to recognise the new character as a coherent part of the game world and a new responsibility, with the ability to impact her parents and environment in ways that did not previously require consideration. The gamescape re-coheres around the controllable child character. When neighbours, who cannot be directly controlled, come over to visit for a party, they need to be recognised as potentially capable of the same agencies the disembodied player is able to enact through other characters, coherency must be assumed. This assumption is almost always proven false, since NPCs in games exist solely to enhance the player (or players') experience, but the player must approach characters with their potential uppermost in mind. This isn't unakin to Heidegger's (1962, first published 1927) concept of *Daesin*, the human being and its fundamentality : "Daesin exists. Furthermore, Daesin is an entity which in each case I myself am. Mineness belongs to any existent Daesin, and belongs to it as the condition which makes authenticity and inauthenticity possible"(1962, p.78). The gamer sees this embodied self in other identities presented to her, other potential locuses of identity which mirror their own. All of these traversals, though at radically different points in a wide variety of games, require the same suspension of disbelief act, one which involves stepping back and assuming coherency rather than stepping forward and assuming veracity.

The difference between games' suspension of disbelief and those of other media is that external veracity is sought by the non-interactive media while internal coherency is sought by the interactive media in order to generate the same continued 'poetic faith' in the text which allows for the creation of the transcendent imaginative space. If we don't accept that the actor in the movie or name in the novel is synonymous with the character and the world presented is initially synonymous with our world, we cannot renew the imaginative space

placed around the text through poetic faith, and the text's imaginative potential is diminished. If we don't accept that the character presented to us in the videogame can potentially impact upon the gamescape the same way that we can, the gamescape becomes incoherent and narrative detaches from gameplay, limiting its ability to communicate effectively and thus our ability to receive meaning from it, our 'poetic faith'. The gamer playing a game with an eye to the storyline knows this is probably not true in the majority of games, but suspends their disbelief to lend additional coherency to the system and closer ally gameplay and narrative. Good designers will seize upon this opportunity by putting together an enticing game-playing-role specific to their own unique game. The game is not setting up its characters to be taken as equivalences to the real, but rather as equivalences to the privileged position occupied by the player. The same reaction occurs, the temporary creation of an imaginary space around the CGI movie star, and the temporary creation of a coherent space around the CGI game character . Perhaps the difference is that the CGI movie star is being presented, but put in a simplified way, the game character is being presented *to you*. The construction of single player gamescapes around the player and played experience alone only goes to reinforce how suspension of disbelief needs to function in these texts. This first stage has turned out quite similar to Gerrig's (1993) 'willing construction of disbelief', but from a much more entrenched position, anchored in some of the specifics of the medium. We first believe almost because we have to, because the immersive, or at least restrictive qualities of the medium we are engaging with enforce it, and we gradually are able to accomplish a willed disavowal of presence as we read a game, enabling the rest of the suspension of disbelief, a knowing form of re-immersion into a game-playing role. This throws into stark relief the distinction between belief and faith as emphasised by Coleridge in his construction of the phrase.

To complete this section with as mundane an example as possible, when we are presented with a mountainside in *World of Warcraft ,* we do not suspend our disbelief to accept it as a real mountainside as we would when presented with a mountainside in a novel, play or CGI movie, even one set in the same *Warcraft* universe as the game. Rather, we agree to allow it to operate as a mountainside by the rules of *WoW* as opposed to the rules of reality. This results in infuriatingly low gradient slopes being impossible to traverse, and this fact being tacitly accepted not to break the fantasy. Actors in our fictional play inspired by *WoW* could

make this distinction apparent via the fourth wall by being thwarted by tiny slopes when they attempted to take a shortcut around the stage. The truth is that *WoW*'s idiosyncrasies do not go unnoticed by its community, and certainly don't get imagined out of it completely, or stalwartly ignored. If low-gradient slopes were giving one side or another an advantage, they would be critiqued like any other game feature, but when they act as an, albeit unbelievable, boundary feature preventing access to areas players are not meant to go, the acceptance of the *WoW* as opposed to real-world physics gradient rules won't cause consternation in an audience versed in the ludic form of suspension of disbelief. Those not so versed will be the digital equivalent of the audience members who ran away from the Lumière brothers' train.

While high-end AAA games have to deal with the uncanny valley, on the other end of the scale simulation games such as *Wii Sports,* T*rack & Field* (Konami, 1983) or *Rock Band* (Harmonix, 2007) are as limited by their technology as VR ever was, forcing users to go through indicative motions as if they were actually being tennis pros, athletes or rock stars, evoking the thing that is simulated, but actually playing a game which has rules and is confined. This creates a different kind of awkward disconnection, requiring the same method of traversal through suspension of disbelief. To take the multiplayer music controller game *Rock Band* as a fuller example, it would seem on the surface that the highly mediated method of play and close connection of gameplay to the music would be a more effective 'simulation' of rock stardom than playing 'air guitar' and thus require less of a suspension of disbelief (in the same direction as a traditional narrative text). *Rock Band*'s gameplay does create a kind of immersion, certainly, but crucially that immersion comes at the price of a suspension of disbelief, replacing the absence of response or complexity in the play of 'air guitar' with complicated and sometimes excruciatingly difficult colour-matching gameplay that roughly follows the twists and turns of the tune. However, the concentration required to play the game relative to the 'narrative' of effortless rock stardom on display both in the game's career mode and its peripheral design means that a degree of mastery of the game is essential to achieve the synthesis of gameplay and narrative which generates the fantasy and turns the players with their plastic guitars into rock stars. The need to play the game (especially at higher difficulty levels which are more analogous to the actual music playing in the background) can eclipse or overwhelm the rest of the process.

The absolute requirement for this skill is made apparent when any one player fails to live up to the difficulty level and the music is abruptly cut off as the interface falls off the screen and the crowd boos the players' characters off stage, throwing the 'narrative' which the game was peddling into stark relief in the living room where the game is being played. Suddenly you aren't rock stars, you suck! Whether all this is actually more pleasurable in the end than 'air guitar' is a moot point since both 'air guitar' and *Rock Band* end up requiring the same suspension of disbelief but from different directions: imagining *in* the complexity, crowd response, personal touches within the music and even the actual guitar in the case of the former and imagining *out* the absolutely mandatory colour-matching game that makes up and drives the latter. The game is trying to embody the player as a rock star, even the strategies for higher-level gameplay are cribbed from guitar playing techniques. However, the suspension of disbelief is actually a disavowal of this attempted embodiment. It is a disavowal of the, tacit, even unconscious acceptance that the in-game rock stars are being activated by you, yet are not you in the same way your imagination allows for when you play air guitar and the boundaries are limitless. The in-game rock-stars are mediated through the game, and gameplay is what motivates them. The suspension of disbelief in the context of the game is a necessary admission by the gamers of the boundaries the game puts around its narrative. The gamers suspend their disbelief in allowing themselves to be embodied in order to create poetic faith in the text and let it generate its fantasy on its own terms.

Though the direction is different to Coleridge's preface to *Kubla Khan*, the effect is the same. In Xanadu language works differently, this could be considered a use of or approach to grammar unique to this poem. After Coleridge entreats us to be dreamers with his anecdotal preface we accept this, and block out both reality and the more barbed sections of our critical consciousness for a while, seeing if this new formulation of language will have an aesthetic effect. In the world of *Rock Band* music works differently, and through playing very complicated colour-matching games you can be a rock star. After the game provides us with reason to do so through exposure to its internal use of game grammar and its novel interface system we accept this, and rebuff the text's overtures of embodiment, instead seeing them as being directed within the same boundaries as everything else in the textual space. It is the suspension of disbelief in both cases which allows these texts to hold

potentially immersive effects, by stepping forward into Coleridge's cadence and imagery, allowing them the veracity he asks for in the preface, and stepping back from what initially seems to be *Rock Band*'s overextending itself. When *Rock Band* tries to tell a group of gamers they are rock stars through images, sound, design and other feedback they know this is manifestly not true, their instruments did not make the sound that just came out of the screen, and the crowd on screen is not a real crowd. However, they play the role of gamers who believe it is true, eased into this position by variations on the various textual features outlined in chapter four. This allows for the sort of thing the *Rock Band* manual suggests as possibilities for play, its implicit game-playing-role: 'showboating like crazy'. All this is possible because gamers first step back and suspend their disbelief in order to let the game immerse them. The immersion couldn't possibly be involuntary or 'total' because of the amount of (often far from) nontrivial effort on display in the creation of the music, the absence of which would lead to not only no music but also, very swiftly, game over. Suspending your disbelief in *Rock Band* is not allowing the 'narrative' to stand alone and ignoring the gameplay, but rather accepting the limitations of the simulation and still agreeing to be immersed by it, covering the gap with the suspension of disbelief. In terms of the multiplayer element of this primarily 'party' focused social game, we can see the willed disavowal of presence demanded by the ludic suspension of disbelief as helping the multiplayer element of the game to shine, functioning as a leveller . It's not the supplication to the game (the second conclusion) which accomplishes this, or the game would be a lot less fun for most of its under-skilled audience. Rather it is the first conclusion, the willed disavowal of presence, which makes rock band function as a social leveller and fun to play at parties.

The construction of games is such that suspension of disbelief is not required when the game influences the narrative or vice-versa. When Aeris dies in *Final Fantasy VII*, the player's agency is impacted and this is non-negotiable. It is a form of gameplay action, as uncontrollable a response as when Mario misses a jump or is hit by a rebounding Koopa shell. Variables which exist beyond the player's control are simply changed, the world is different whether the player chooses to believe it or not (Heaton, 2006). The numeric impact of the loss of Aeris (depending on how many levels she'd gained and items she was wearing) is just subtracted from the variables that make up the game. The narrative has

generated an attachment to these variables relevant to both the main character in the story, since she is a love interest, and the gamer, since she is a worthwhile healer who fills a helpful niche. This works because it resonates on both levels and reinforces a sense of suspension of disbelief by making plain the equivalency of Aeris to the player. It does not require a suspension of disbelief for this to happen, but it does require one to be occurring for the gamer to feel sympathy for the character and sorrow for her loss, a loss which is communicated on both a narrative and a ludic level. Crucially this is a sympathy rather than an empathy because the gamer feels it through the filter of suspension of disbelief. The sadness, is communicated and enhanced, but it is a sympathy communicated to outside the text via the suspension of disbelief, not the empathy which the game solicits. This stands in opposition to those who often consider gaming experiences without also considering the context of the suspension of disbelief, of which Wolf is a good example : "the player is called upon not just to watch but to act; simulation becomes emulation, and sympathy becomes empathy" (2005, p.3) This cannot follow, since the position of the gamer who has suspended disbelief is outside of the text, aware that they are not Cloud (even if they have renamed Cloud with their own name), but equally aware of Cloud's position as the protagonist in the story. Empathy is a lot harder to achieve in the medium of games, and Chapter five reads the Mantis battles of the Metal Gear series as part of a grand strategy to solicit empathy for a single character within the constraints of gaming's unique suspension of disbelief.

Taking the game at face value, accepting embodiment as what it portrays itself to be leads to the experience failing or jarring, since *Rock Band* does not make you a rock star, and there *are* limits to the narrative potential of the RPG which seems to be addressing you personally. In both cases the suspension of disbelief is a participatory response, a dislocation, just the direction of the dislocation is in opposite directions, and understanding this subtle change should be of great interest to potential game writers seeking to perceive how best to write effectively within the medium. It also reinforces Salen and Zimmerman's assertion of the medium's fundamentals, running in line with their insistence that "play is a process of meta-communication, a double consciousness in which the player is well aware of the artificiality of the play situation." (2004 p.451) This taking the game at face value is prevented by the suspension of disbelief which, when the game shows us a texture-

mapped, all to perfect human face and tells the player 'this is you', ensures that we accept and understand that it is not actually us, but rather a distinct character bound by a very different set of rules to our own. Bridging the visual difference here is only one facet of how the suspension of disbelief works in the opposite direction in videogames in comparison to other texts. It functions as an avowal of the self outside the text rather than a folding of the self and its preconceptions into the text. This in fact motivates immersion, as long as we remain aware of the truth of the immersive fallacy, since it allows for easier maintenance of immersive periods. Immersion is something negotiated with the text, something we work at through the taking up of a game-playing role. The parts which speak to 'total immersion' don't take place in the awkward stuttering space of dissonance, but rather in the imaginative edifice that is enabled by it. Real immersion is a product of the suspension of disbelief, and this shifting in direction is a useful analytical tool that has not been seen before and is showcased in this thesis.

Conclusion 2: Much of the suspension of disbelief in games is mandatory.

Many definitions of suspension of disbelief have been tested and found lacking in this thesis. A secondary goal that has emerged through writing it up has been to attempt to make suspension of disbelief a useful, sharpened tool of a term for games rather than the awkward, mostly rhetorical blunderbuss it so often becomes. I have held onto another definition until this point in order to highlight the value of some of the conclusions. At first, Barry P. Smith's definition appears to directly equate graphical realism with the suspension of disbelief:

> In every entertainment medium, content producers attempt to draw consumers into an alternate, mediated reality for a period of time. Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief" is made easier if fewer noticeably nonreal artefacts attract attention. A more realistic portrayal of a virtual environment can make the illusion of immersion in that environment more complete. (2006, p.50)

In Smith's discussion of realism this approach appears reductive since, as was made clear above, graphical fidelity certainly can act as a balm to the senses, but the game form will ensure that it still presents the same out-and-out challenge to the gamer, still asks for the act of will. However, from the position offered by the first conclusion, that of the

repositioned gamer/reader, it can be redeemed somewhat. Part of the problem with this definition and with games studies' takes on games and suspension of disbelief is a lack of specificity. Indeed there are no focused analyses of this, which is what this thesis remedies. Lumping games in with 'every entertainment medium' is simply insufficient. Elements of suspension of disbelief are not emphasised over others in games, as chapter one showed they can be in other media. Games demand a different approach. The repositioned, literate gamer this thesis proposes actively seeks out the 'nonreal artefacts' in any given gamescape, pixel-hunting in 2D adventure games, learning solid commands in text parser interfaces and having an awareness of hit-boxes in 3D combat. Because the gamer is initially disavowing the sense of presence offered up by the text anyway, all these other considerations aid in accomplishing this rather than 'breaking' an immersion or some sort of a forced suspension of disbelief. Working back, outwards into this disavowed state is the creation of a corridor of disbelief between the gamer and the game, feeling out the contours of its game-playing-role and enabling a suspension of disbelief which would indeed correlate well with Smith's definition from the primed, agentic position of the willed disavowal of presence. This thesis has demonstrated that what definitions such as Smith's and the majority of the other game-centric suspension of disbelief approaches critiqued here miss is just how important the problem of fundamental *activity* is for gaming hermeneutics. It's very easy to miss, especially since so much of the technology and rhetoric surrounding the media is geared by or is tuned to total immersion, and much of the nuance only becomes apparent if a media diet consists of games as a principal part. The fact that scholars like Holland who focus entirely on suspension of disbelief see fit to ignore games is testament to this, the activity demanded by the medium sets it in a whole separate space to others. Knowing that this activity is more than pressing buttons on command or memorising sequences, that it modifies the flow of the whole experience and changes its meaning is gamer knowledge. As the medium has grown this knowledge has been hard-won principally from games which don't accomplish their narrative or ludic aims immensely well, a fact exposed when a game which exploits them more fully comes around. The 'Mantis moments' of *MGS* stuck in my mind, they telegraphed how the form itself has a heavy impact on the suspension of disbelief process. The fourth wall breaks in *MGS* made it clear to me that the sort of suspension of disbelief that I was used to from other media, and naturally thought that I was applying to games, involved my changing of the environmental rules by which I undertook

my reading or watching when I had an awareness of the fictive frame, much as Holland (2009) describes. It was games, though, that were actually making many of these rule changes *for* me, and Mantis made it explicit that they did this whether I liked it or not when he stopped playing by those rules and took me along for the ride.

To read a poem, we need not suspend our disbelief. Language is a tool that is used to create various textual edifices, and we can read a poem as a sequence of language. Watching a film we can see a series of images, and watching a play we can isolate movement, speeches or moments without allowing them to fall under the umbrella of the 'shadows of imagination', we do not have to suspend our disbelief for this to occur. Poetic language and the grammar of cinema are of course modifiers that need to be applied in these instances but, as Myers points out, there is a fundamental difference where games are concerned:

> Poetic language points us towards an objective correlative: a pre-linguistic state of direct and immediate experience. Video games, in contrast, point us to the more localized and individualized phenomena of the psychophysical: what we believe to be true. (2009, p.52)

In games, the designer's 'shadows of the imagination', their rules and characters and methods of interaction are not so insubstantial, they *can* impose their meanings and impose them hard through an equivalency of narrative response, often death, to gameplay action. Realising that gamers are in this overwhelmed position before they even have the option to suspend their disbelief chips away at the figure of the agentic, powerful player, showing that in a reading and imagining sense their options are more limited than is usual. Aarseth reminds us of this when discussing the evolution of hypertext through its early expeditions into interactivity and thus by extension the game form:

> Hyperfictions written in *Storyspace*, like *Afternoon*, do not allow its readers free browsing, unlike any codex fiction in existence. The reader's freedom from linear sequence, which is often held up as the political and cognitive strength of hypertext, is a promise easily retracted and wholly dependent on the hypertext system in question. (1997, p.77)

Making use of interactivity means collaring the reader in a way which is certainly uncomfortable at first, especially if one only realises one is playing a game after some time. Coleridge knew of a form of this, and expressed it in his prefaces. Coleridge could have gone even further than he did with attempting to sculpt readers' experience of Kubla Khan. He could have glossed the whole poem, much as Bunyan did with *Pilgrim's Progress* (first published in 1678). He could have provided all sorts of supposed proof, as Thomas More had done with *Utopia* (Bruce, 1999) (as described on page 62). For Coleridge, though, the launch pad pre-story of the person from Porlock was enough. He knew that regardless of the tools at his disposal, he couldn't have prevented readers from taking away different visions of the experience. By contrast, even in the freest, most agency-infused sandbox or art focused games, there is still a limited vocabulary , and the only way to continue the experience is pre-set by the designers, even when real choice between multiple routes or alternatives is made available. Diving into these texts makes suspending our disbelief non-negotiable. Galloway's formulation of 'machine acts' (2006) makes this explicit, with less of an anti-storytelling or story-analysis agenda than the groundwork laid by Aarseth, Juul and other self-defined ludologists.

Claiming that any element of a reader-text interface is non-negotiable certainly seems bold, but seen in context with the rest of the thesis, this second conclusion forms a calm reminder that games need to be approached not on the terms of other media, but on their own. This opinion is a lot less disagreeable, but still upholding the idea that the difference of games sets them apart from other media, that they need to be approached differently, from both a participatory and analytical standpoint, or else never seem any more than failed exercises in awkward hybridity of forms which should not be collided. Academics can be guilty of this too, looking towards an impossible future of total immersion from an unstable base in the sacrosanct magic circle, a concept which is fraying at the edges as games experiment beyond 'theming' and into real storytelling through the form. Games aren't *en route* to an evolved, perfect form, they are a form already which is discovering itself almost as quickly as it innovates. Perhaps a better way of putting it is that a skeptic could approach narrato-ludic gamescapes as being wastelands of compromise. This is implied, to a degree, in Holland's (2009) dismissal of games. This critical observer plays a videogame and in the moment sees a situation that requires allowances above and beyond interpretation in order

to be comprehensible. Unable to go on from one moment to the next without agreeing to the compromise set forth by the text, since they cannot change it, they are forced to compromise themselves, and drive this awkward, broken thing forward until either it reaches its destination or they can go no further. Tolkien's (1939, p.37) negativity regarding suspension of disbelief as a pale imitation of the real thing seems ideal for what the skeptic sees in modern videogames. In his dismissal, Tolkien even makes reference to suspension of disbelief being non-negotiable when dealing with 'games or make-believe', their low stature compared to other media being assured. It is physically possible to play modern videogames with this mindset alongside a lusory attitude. Perhaps someone operating with this mindset (and they need not be doing so just to be contrary) could legitimately be said not to have a suspension of disbelief forced upon them as the price of entry to a text. But when we become willing to suspend our disbelief, the act of will is at one remove from the text, and the principle behind the conclusion applies either way. When we allow ourselves to become empowered disbelievers and accept that suspension of disbelief, from this point on, is non-negotiable, we trade that right of potential 'true' disbelief for a new perspective. Instead of seeing compromises, we can see alliances between meaning, narrative and gameplay. Instead of feeling cornered by the different, grating elements of the experience, we can feel excited by the sparks these different mediums can generate beneath this new, overarching form and instead of traversing a wasteland, we suspend our disbelief and are left looking at a land of opportunity. This conclusion is restrictive, but also positive; it is saying that the game form makes its audience more likely to suspend their disbelief and take on a game-playing-role, since the alternative is privileging one side of the experience to an excess which will be made apparent through the form.

We see this excess when multiplayer games become riddled with 'exploits', and desire on the part of some players to win or to massage play statistics overpowers all the other facets of the game. This is often referred to by players of multiplayer games as 'imbalance' a symptom of a problem with the game's algorithm or the way in which it is presented. A 'balanced' game isn't an entirely 'fair' one necessarily, but it is one which is ludo-diegetically sound, in that it can't be hacked or modified or is intrinsically broken. The kinds of game-playing roles offered up by multiplayer FPS games such as *Team Fortress 2* are characterised by an interplay of strategy and awareness of likely player behaviours. They can tolerate

quite a lot of shifting around, especially when strange tactics like rocket-jumping or rushing have a penalty associated with them (a loss in hit points, or a big gamble). Multiplayer FPS gamers enjoy the level playing field of the game and pull to the fore assumptions about the cost of entry to the gamespace which are often less of a concern in single-player games. Everyone needs to be bound by the same ludic conventions even when, in the case of PC gaming at least, many different degrees of hardware, network and interface issues can impact how far 'skill' is really allowed to prevail. Smart design has led to narrative tropes being deployed on-the-fly during multiplayer games, showcasing the value of the narrative gestalt even in these inhospitable environs. *Team Fortress 2* creates rivalries between players using cinematic effects during the downtime between death and respawn, zooming in for a snapshot of the player who took you down and playing menacing music. Such devices support this revenge mechanic with ludic rewards as well. These brief narrative moments and the game's approach to teamwork and visual style chisel out its game-playing-role which is offered not as a deepening of the experience in any significant way, but a way to make it more fun. Buy into the tongue-in-cheek silliness of the *Team Fortress 2* art style and its irreverent humour, and you'll be best able to enjoy its sometimes unfair and crushing gameplay with the attitude that there's always another fight around the corner.

The fundamental activity associated with games stops being an issue in light of the other two conclusions; the willed disavowal of presence and the game-playing role. However, fundamental activity is the issue which motivates both of these other conclusions, acclimatising the gamer for the ease of a strange reversal in the usual method of suspension of disbelief. The necessities of the medium shape the imaginative processes it allows, and the readings in this thesis are informed by this conclusion. Someone citing this thesis and writing about games can define suspension of disbelief in a usefully analytical rather than ill-considered, archaic, or rhetorical fashion.

Conclusion 3: In suspending their disbelief, gamers step into a game-playing-role.

The problem of dissonance, which to some extent motivated this thesis and characterised the field of game studies when it was first embarked upon, is remoulded into the third conclusion of the game-playing-role. Instead of players set at one remove from games, seeing the grating of narrative and gameplay, gamers adopt a game-playing role as

empowered disbelievers occupying the same role-play Coleridge had advocated from the beginning. Looking at a gamer playing a game, nothing has changed in light of this thesis. They still react to awkward gameplay and narrative synthesis by wincing, or perhaps sighing, and they still hardly notice when strong design features enable connections that make suspension of disbelief in games feel as effortless as it can do at the cinema. Simultaneously, everything is different. What began as an image of an interactor striving to allow a game to tell its story by forgiving the failings of this 'narrative engine' is now not a reader hobbled by the need to suspend a foreign form of suspension of disbelief. The other two conclusions; the willed disavowal of presence and the suspension of disbelief being required to a degree - accomplish this by placing the reader/player in the position of empowered disbeliever. Game-playing-roles are suspension of disbelief reshaped in the mould of the game form, with an active reader who knows entirely where the undertaking is occurring, and suspends disbelief in order to enhance the experience, often through the removal of dissonance even in games which aren't entirely story focused, or multiplayer games. The games studies arena into which this thesis enters is less polarised than it previously has been, but this intervention into the problem of dissonance is still new material. I do not believe that seeing game-playing-roles offered by texts to (redefined, presence-disavowing) gamers entirely solves the problem of dissonance however. What it does do though, is frame it to achieve two of the aims of this thesis. First, it explains dissonance without privileging either side in the narratology and ludology debate and second, it explains in a concise and useful way what is happening when players suspend their disbelief in games.

The game-playing-role provides the resolution to Frasca's disappointed "Hamlet's dilemma would be irrelevant in a videogame, simply because he would be able to be and not to be." (2000 p.4) Frasca's lament comes from the point of view of a designer rather than a player. Designers see inefficient game mechanics relative to the theme, insufficient connecting tissue between their games' gameplay and narrative and often design necessitates a top-down view of their text rather than the first-person way the text is consumed by the player. While it may not be possible to actually give the gamer a choice to rival Hamlet's[45], it is

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[45] Although Hideo Kojima, Peter Molyneux and other auteur or 'indie' designers have proposed novel game ideas which would accomplish this, such as games which overwrite themselves as you play, or social games which give one single participant a huge degree of agency over the rest of the players. Things like this last

possible to put them in the same place as the theatre audience which sympathises with the choice offered, through careful definition of a game-playing role. Meaningful decisions, after all, carry a lot more weight than those which are less impactful or only resonate on a surface, narrative level or, worse still, are false choices whose illusory nature is broken as soon as they are presented. The selection of the *Suikoden 3* flame champion, the choice of endings in *Deus Ex* and every single PvP encounter in the massive, viciously unforgiving space MMO-RPG *Eve Online* is testament to this. Mechanics used to generate consequence and tension on a ludic or a narrative level are fairly trivial, but provide a secondary resonance to choices that is vital to the medium. To address the context of Frasca's concern, the valueless, constant death which characterises many videogames becomes rephrased through game-playing-roles as a reinforcement of the readings which do result in progression. *Super Meat Boy* (Team Meat, 2010) makes this point when, at the end of each of its harrowingly difficult levels, all of the previous failed attempts of the session are shown hurtling through the level in a replay, a reminder of what it took to get to that point. The 'valueless death' Frasca comments on is one of the ways the suspension of disbelief is constantly renewed by the text from which it emanates. Frustration, aporia and epiphany are par for the course when negotiating between gameplay and narrative in these texts, and consequence takes on a different hue.

Seeing the game-playing-role as a form of role-play, and seeing what Coleridge defined as suspension of disbelief originally as the taking up of a role rather than an entirely physical or psychological process is definitely an approach taken here in this thesis that has not been taken elsewhere. It is helpful because it focuses in upon the synthesis between the theme and algorithm sides of the game-text. It also functions to make a strong bridge between games and other media despite ludo-narrative dissonance. With the caveats of the other two conclusions in place, seeing a ludic suspension of disbelief as the taking up of a game-playing-role allows for narrative and storytelling analysis which doesn't neglect the key elements of game form. It is a genuine rehabilitation of a term from literary-aesthetic theory, tuning suspension of disbelief for a situation Coleridge could never have imagined. It's a useful tool for textual analysis too, since the experiential nature of games and

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player empowerment example have already happened in indie MMO-RPG *A Tale in the Desert* (Egenesis, 2003).

particularly gameplay is often hard to capture, and mapping out a game-playing-role through observing the grammar of a game, how its gameplay connects in with its narrative and what allowances it seems to emphasise, moment by moment is quite a phenomenological but also quite a tuned mindset to bring to a game analysis. The game-playing-role is the conclusion of this thesis which best sums up how it has achieved its aims in that the concept answers how games can simultaneously be sparks of the imagination and complicated, sometimes fiddly challenges.

To sum up everything so far, we can observe the three conclusions; the willed disavowal of presence, suspension of disbelief being mandatory to a degree in games and the game-playing-role, working together. Willed disavowal of presence made possible by the fundamental activity games require enables the taking up of a game-playing-role. From the perspective of a player this seems more useful: the game is trying to tell me that I'm there, in its diegesis, or if not in its diegesis then bound up in the scope of its rules, but I know I am not there. I also know that I *have* to be involved in order for the game to continue, and the game is offering me, sometimes with a firmer hand like Kojima's titles, sometimes with a lighter touch in something like a fighting game, or a puzzle game like B*ejeweled*, the opportunity to suspend my disbelief and pretend that it is real. The circumstances of this offer aren't the sort that are usually allowed when engaging with media, so getting 'lost' in a game and 'lost in a book are decidedly different experiences brought about by almost opposite means in terms of the decisions which the reader is taking. Reading *The Lord of The Rings*(henceforth LOTR) and exploring Middle Earth in *Lord of the Rings Online* (henceforth *LOTRO*) both ask for a suspension of disbelief that will feel very similar but function very differently. Reading the book I empathise with the characters, my point of view being shaped by the language and illustrations. I fill in the gaps with my imagination, creating much of the scale and scope of the world through suspension of my disbelief that this sort of place could actually exist or these sort of things could actually happen. At first, being dropped into *LOTRO's* interpretation of Bree or Rivendell might feel similar to reading the book, but in order to get to this state of affairs I'm conveniently forgetting for the sake of imaginative freedom how much the interface and the form (and in this example to a higher degree than usual, the community of other players) govern the experience. I don't need to believe that this place could possibly exist, I'm in charge of a character who's standing right

in it. If I don't believe that the sort of things in the text could actually happen, then I'll realise their consequences in short order. Instead, I'll learn the grammar use of *LOTRO*, and sometimes that use will collide with my interpretation of *LOTR*, often when designers wanted it to, such as in the fellowship manoeuvres mechanic, but also when they didn't explicitly intend for it, such as when watching the sun set over Imladris or smiling at fellow enthusiasts using Old English names or putting together an impromptu lute concert outside The Prancing Pony (Brown and Krzywinska, 2011). Both these primarily ludic and primarily thematic or narrative experiences come about because of the same game-playing-role, otherwise the first would seem a dull, procedural task and the second would be a hollow reinterpretation of an adaptation, an entirely visual, rather than participatory set of experiences. The world around me doesn't fade away as I play, and this isn't just because it's a multiplayer game and I might be talking to my friends at the same time. It doesn't fade away because unlike in the book it is a key part of the experience, and in taking on the game-playing-role offered up by the game this is what I'm accepting when I pretend that it is real. It's an evolved form of what Nell (1988) originally defined as 'ludic reading', with the ludic being redefined in light of the language of the medium. What's going on when I feel immersed in the game, even though I know that I'm not and I know that if I really were the whole edifice would stop it; really isn't as fluid and as immediate and as transporting as reading a book, but it isn't less of a transcending, imaginative experience either. Watching the sun set over Imladris I get the feeling that this is a designed experience, yet also that I might be the only one who will ever see it. The imaginary ingredient of the experience weaves together and empowers what would otherwise be dissonant, chaotic elements. When I suspend my disbelief in the game there is a transcendent plane on which the story and the camaraderie of our Fellowship fighting together cohere. It isn't the same transcendent plane which replaced the map of Middle Earth with the expanse of world in my imagination when reading the book, but it's connected with it and no lesser thing, just a different experience which can apply pressure on other parts of myself made receptive by a similar suspension of disbelief.

Fig.26 - Sunset over Imladris in LOTRO

Coda

Although they have no real choice, the gamer suspends disbelief willingly, stepping into a role which counters the dissonance of the form. They become not the totally immersed dreamer of the Holodeck, nor the externalised dream-watcher shocked when the dream breaks out of the screen and becomes real. Instead, the gamer is a lucid dreamer, the price paid for the suspension of disbelief and its accompanying, enforced act of will is reflected in the additional control and agency the gamer is allowed, specifically suspending disbelief but retaining temporal control of both the moment and momentum of gameplay. Taking up a game-playing-role offered by a text is often not the most efficient or effective way to play the game, but the natural route taken by gamers who try to mitigate ludo-narrative dissonance. Sometimes they'll do it without much of a push, the mitigation comes about easily through closer connectivity between game and theme, as well as an appreciation of the difference of the position of the gamer who is disavowing the presence offered up to

them by the text in the first instance. At other times the scope or construction of the game makes it more difficult to take up a game-playing-role and complete the suspension of disbelief. The gamer who suspends disbelief is not quite the 'ideal' game story reader nor the 'ideal' game player in terms of their manipulation of the algorithm which underpins the game. Just as Coleridge knew, the reader who suspends disbelief can still be a harsh, albeit more constructive critic, but the difference is that they can criticise from the perspective of having given the text a chance to work its magic. Suspension of disbelief being seen to operate in games does much to rehabilitate them with ideas of the literary or definitions of art, and chapter four in particular has shown that thinking it through and applying it consistently can begin a case for the aesthetic value of gameplay as equivalent to other media. This thesis has also built upon the reading models referenced throughout by showing that the position of imagination in games is in the same place as the dissonant clash, that is the ability to use a game, on its own terms which are often very specific, as a springboard for the creation of imaginary spaces . That which is imagined in games is often a greater coherency than is evident, or a better meshing together of theme and game, narrative and gameplay than the designers were able to accomplish. In this sense it is quite a passive mood to appreciate games in, especially given that the usual contours of any other media .

What can the conclusions offer to games designers, or even players? Confidence in how a mode of engagement and a suspension of disbelief occurs allows for interesting, novel and artistic remoulding of it such as those masterfully undertaken on the AAA games stage by Hideo Kojima. Designers like David Cage who aim to create games which resonate on emotional registers which are the mainstay of other media could do well to consider a ludic suspension of disbelief, particularly its relevance to character design or narrative consequence, and its preference for sympathy over empathy. As games break out of the screen and demonstrate greater spatial awareness without entirely locating suspension of disbelief within the input device, some of the nooks and crannies these conclusions attempt to throw light on will come to the forefront, since 'active' gaming needn't mean lionising the control method to the degree where it becomes the be-all and end-all of the experience. The directions in which Nintendo are looking with their future gaming technologies such as the WiiU might herald gaming experiences truly breaking free of the screen and by extension the shackles of the cinematic suspension of disbelief. Gamers might do well to

see the degree of responsibility which a ludic suspension of disbelief places on them to make active affordances, often very different, of each newly bespoke game-text they encounter if they want to get the most coherent experience of both its gameplay and narrative gestalts. Perhaps even the notion of gameplay can be remoulded a little by these conclusions which show how, with the right caveats, gameplay can correlate and get along with other kinds of narrative experiences. For now, games are caught in a problematic middle ground between the promises of total immersion Virtual Reality and the comparatively mundane suspension of disbelief necessary for traditional forms of fiction. Games and game systems labour to create immersion and remove what is generally perceived as the need for a suspension of disbelief, often fuelling their media machines with rhetoric invoking the phrase. Yet, since it is the suspension of disbelief that ties together gameplay and narrative, attempts to and claims of dispelling it are completely futile since the basis of the form defies the concept of total immersive simulation. Regardless of their innovations and technological breakthroughs, game companies are still publishing games and games, like films, theatre or literature, require a suspension of disbelief if they are to fulfil their goal and role as fictions.

As other media round the corner towards the digital, and the humanities reshape into the digital humanities, or perhaps 'the digital' becomes a redundant term because of its sheer ubiquity, reconstituting key terms like suspension of disbelief will become all the more important if we are to be able to maintain and use properly in the future the work which has allowed us to get where we already are. Other media are moving towards or touching upon the game-like as they embrace the benefits of the digital. Kindle e-books, as one example, seek it out to add value to their incarnations of classic and modern literary texts, and one of the principal tools they can now leverage is interactivity. Suspension of disbelief has become more complicated, but still retains much of its flair when the requisite caveats are put in place upon it. Seeing, and proving games as a space where suspension of disbelief (the taking up of a game-playing-role) can happen is this thesis's main innovative contribution, its rehabilitation of Coleridge's term with game construction another. I hope that this thesis is as true as possible to Coleridge's own original version of suspension of disbelief even though the kind of spaces we explore as a matter of course in games would have seemed to him beyond the imagination. Pulling down some of the overtly rhetorical

definitions of suspension of disbelief certainly feels like a useful contribution to have made! I intend to go on to expand upon game-playing-roles and their implications in future work. The ramifications of the idea that gamers need to come to games in 'good faith', and the impact of these conclusions on how empathy in games is read on the field of writing for games are also places I would like to revisit. This thesis will underpin my approach to games in the future, and makes up a manifesto of a perspective sometimes at odds with loud voices in game studies. I believe the gamer's imagination has whole new ways to be tapped, and that academic contributions and analyses can hopefully result in these breakthroughs occurring sooner rather than later.

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Game system key –

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- "Gameboy" - Nintendo Gameboy

- "Gamecube" – Nintendo Gamecube

- "SNES" - Nintendo Super Nintendo Entertainment System

- "Megadrive" – SEGA Megadrive

- "MSX" – SEGA Master System

- "NES" – Nintendo Entertainment System

- "PC" – Personal Computer (Windows)

- "PS1" – Sony Playstation

- "PS2" – Sony Playstation 2

- "PS3" – Sony Playstation 3

- "Wii" – Nintendo Wii

- "Xbox" - Microsoft Xbox

- "Xbox 360" – Microsoft Xbox 360