"A Man Chooses; A Slave Obeys"—Player Identity and Manipulation in Video Game Narrative
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From oral tradition, to written literature, to motion pictures, to interactive video games, the media by which narrative is expressed continue to become more engaging and immersive, enabling an audience to experience a story on deeper and more profound levels. Film directors such as Alfred Hitchcock changed the way that we as an audience perceive narrative, not merely telling a story, but inviting—and even implicating—the audience in the narrative, affecting the way that we relate to characters and situations by engaging more of our human senses (for example, Hitchcock's use of the first-person perspective). Now, with the advent of video games, the connection that an audience can have with a narrative can be deeper, causing them to invest more of themselves in the story and characters by controlling and interacting with the virtual world. The potential for this sort of immersion is greater than other media such as film or literature. As Ian Bogost argues when referring to Charles Hill's "comprehensive continuum of vividness," "procedural representations with high process intensity and with meaningful symbolic representations in their processes—specimens like interactive fiction, software, and especially videogames—certainly earn a spot above moving images on the continuum" (*Persuasive Games* 35). The more interactive the medium, the more potent the narrative can be.

However, the concept of immersion is rather convoluted. Bogost refers to Gonzalo Frasca, expressing the difference between simulation and narrative as "the former providing an interactive experience for representations, the latter providing, at best, a more distant and less 'firsthand' experience of the representation in question," using Janet Murray's definition of immersion: "the ability to construct new beliefs through interaction with computational media" (*Unit Operations* 98). On the other hand, in her master's thesis *Video Games: Perspective, Point-of-View, and Immersion*, Laurie N. Taylor points out that "'Immersion' is another much-contested term in videogaming discourse" and draws a very slight (and admittedly "not exclusive") distinction between immersion in terms of narration and immersion in terms of video game interactivity:

> For my purposes, I will define it here as *diegetic immersion*, where the player is immersed in the act of playing the video game, and as *intra-diegetic* or *situated immersion*, where the player is immersed in playing the game and in the experience of the game space as a spatial and narrated space. Immersion is often taken to be a singular event where the player becomes engrossed in a video game just as a reader would become engrossed in a novel, or a viewer in a film. This immersion is diegetic immersion—the reader, watcher, player becomes lost in the text and becomes unaware of the creation and relation of the elements within the text. Video games also allow intra-diegetic immersion, which allows the player to become deeply involved in the game as an experiential space. In a video game, the attributes of the game do create the illusion that the player is indeed within the space of the diegesis, whereas this is a primarily figural notion—a conceit of narrative convention—in other modes of representation like film. (Taylor 12)

But because, as Taylor admits, these are not mutually exclusive definitions of immersion, there is a level to which these two forms of immersion combine or "blend" to create a wholly unique method of experiencing a narrative, which can often be self-referential (Taylor 13).

In this regard, *BioShock* creator Ken Levine has been known to openly admit his manipulation of the audience playing *BioShock*, not only in causing the player to relate to the game's main character, but also in forcing them to think about the relationship that developers have with the audience, particularly the illusion of freedom given to players. In an interview with Dan Shu in *Electronic Gaming Monthly*, Levine outlines his philosophy for player-character interaction, identity, and immersion:

> You know, there is a notion of free will in games—but you don't really have a lot of free will in games. You get quests. Somebody tells you to go do this thing, and if you want to succeed in the game, we very naturally give up free will [to do so]…In retrospect, you are a little puppet in videogames. I said, "Well, let's turn that into the narrative." Because I'd always rather piss off the gamer than the character. I'd always rather insult the gamer directly. If you have a villain, make it personal. Make the gamer feel like the villain's bitch, not the character. When we came up with this notion, that you can sort of have the villain manipulating the player, to a degree that when the player finally realizes it, he's already been manipulated for quite a long time, and then sort of realizes that this is what happens in every game, but you don't even think about it…I thought it was a nice little way to comment, not just on *BioShock*, but to make gamers think about their experience of free will when they play games. (Shu 46)

A significant amount of video game scholarship today discusses the concept of player-avatar identity with particular emphasis of the ever-growing market of massively multiplayer online role playing games (MMORPGs). However, the characters created in such games—or in single-player sandbox-type RPGs like them, such as the *Elder Scrolls* series—tend to either reflect the player's own personality and characteristics or an idealized version of the player's fantasy self. In his study "The Relationship of Players to Their Avatars in MMORPGs: Differences between Adolescents, Emerging Adults and Adults," Lukas Blinka surveyed several players of MMORPGs of varying age groups to determine the level and nature of a player's identity with an online avatar, featuring such questions as "Sometimes I think just about my character while not gaming," "Both me and my character are the same," "I would rather be like my character," and "Being like my character would help me in some situations of my real life" (Blinka). While these questions do address the issue of how a player can be influenced by a character—in this case, one of his or her own creation—the issue of how this relationship and identification translated into a narrative, particularly a linear one, is only hinted at. How might a player identify with a character that is predefined by the game's developers? How might this affect how the player perceives the narrative as it unfolds?

James Paul Gee points out this distinction between the types of characters that players portray when playing different kinds of video games:

> No deep learning takes place unless learners make an extended commitment of self for the long haul. Learning a new domain…requires the learner to take on a

new identity: to make a commitment to see and value work and the world in the ways in which good [workers] do. Good video games capture players through identity. Players either inherit a strongly formed and appealing character—e.g., Solid Snake in *Metal Gear Solid*—or they get to build a character from the ground up, as in *Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*. Either way, players become committed to the new virtual world in which they will live, learn, and act through their commitment to their new identity. (Gee 4-5)

But, as Gee mentions, the level to which the player is immersed in the game world and in the narrative is profound regardless if the character is developed by the player or pre-defined by the game's developers. However, the difference lies in how the player perceives the narrative itself; if a player creates a character, then they play a significant part in how the narrative is structured and how it unfolds, but if the character is pre-defined, the narrative affects the player more than vice versa. In other words, rather than the player impacting the narrative, the narrative impacts the player.

When we look at a game such as *BioShock*, we as players begin to realize that we are not in as much control as we tend to think. Right from the start of the game until the end, the events of the game unfold from a first-person perspective, with a heavy emphasis on real-time storytelling similar to *Half-Life 2* (Elliot and Malloy 23). So, the player is essentially seeing and experiencing the events of the game through the eyes of the protagonist, Jack. The game begins with a flight over the Mid-Atlantic, the only time we hear Jack actually speak (although his voice his heard in various grunts, groans, and expressions of agony or discomfort elsewhere). As the screen turns black, we hear the sounds of screaming and the plane crashing into the ocean, but this blackout serves more than a purely aesthetic purpose. Since everything is from Jack's point-of-view, the fact that the screen turns black suggests that Jack himself blacks out, failing to perceive what actually happens in that moment, just as the player is prevented from perceiving it. Why did the plane crash? The player does not find out until Jack himself finds out.

When the player brings Jack's viewpoint toward a large structure in the middle of the ocean, both player and character are drawn to it: for survival in Jack's case, for curiosity and progression of story in the player's case. We also get an impression of how Jack is feeling at the moment he sets foot upon dry land; we hear him gasp for air and even shiver, suggesting either a sense of cold or fear, probably both. This fear and tension increases as Jack's bathysphere approaches a dark, ominous room where, trapped and helpless, both player and character watch in horror as a splicer disembowels a pleading man. The dark atmosphere, enclosed space, inoperable door, brutal murder, and lack of any weapons or means of defense serve the narrative purpose of making the player realize that they are trapped, helpless, and at the mercy of a creature that will more than likely savagely kill them—or rather, the character they are controlling—without mercy or hesitation. This fear may be coupled with disbelief on the part of the player, who may think that surely the character would not be killed so early in the game, but *BioShock* doesn't give players the time to process this thought before shocking us again. This is further emphasized by the brief moments of flashing light that reveal the splicer's claws slashing into the hull of the bathysphere just above Jack's head, imparting his fear onto the player just before the splicer is forced to retreat, as well as the eventual appearance of the health bar in the upper corner of the screen, a traditional video game convention that informs experienced players

that now they are capable of being harmed by in-game foes and elements—an unsettling realization.

Although playing a game like *BioShock* cannot necessarily make a player feel physical pain, there is a certain robbery of free will on the part of the player that causes Jack to severely injure himself, with some rather disturbing results. For example, in order to progress early in the game, the player must find the Electro Bolt plasmid and use it to open a door. Therefore, Jack must inject himself with the plasmid and rewrite his genetic code, an apparently agonizing process, as suggested by his screams of pain. During this moment, we may not be feeling Jack's pain, but can still sympathize with him as we must see his pain through his own eyes. And shortly after this experience, Jack is rendered helpless, too weak from the genetic rewrite to move, and suddenly surrounded by splicers wishing to harvest him; because the player cannot control Jack's movements, the player is helpless as well. Likewise, in order to progress the game's narrative, the player must turn Jack into a Big Daddy, a process that involves drilling a hole in his throat, permanently maiming him, perhaps imparting a sense of guilt onto the player at having injured Jack—a character who they have controlled for dozens of hours and experienced several hardships with—even if it is the only way to progress the narrative. Alternately, when Frank Fontaine gives the verbal code to gradually stop Jack's heart, this gives the player a sense of urgency, as now there is a rough time limit before Jack dies, and he will continue to get weaker until that happens. So the player now has the same sort of desperation in finding the antidote to the genetic code as Jack and identifies with his plight.

The narrative of *BioShock* is about a character who is not only essentially a blank slate, but a puppet and tool of those who created him, a fact that he doesn't realize until over halfway into the game. Likewise, the player receives the exact same information that Jack receives at the exact same moment that he receives it. This has the result of making the player fully relate to Jack in the moment that his true identity is revealed, essentially a creation of Dr. Tenebaum for the purpose of assassinating Rapture founder Andrew Ryan. This is further emphasized by the constantly-used phrase "Would you kindly?" which is used as a sort of code word to force Jack to do someone else's will. Because the player assumes that they have been in control of Jack throughout the entire game, they are amazed when they finally realize that Jack's actions—and in effect, their own—have been orchestrated from Atlas' constant use of "Would you kindly?" The player might be deluded in thinking they have freedom in the game, but in reality, they are not allowed to perform any action that isn't programmed into the game ahead of time. As Bogost points out, "the player of a videogame is usually not allowed to change the rules of play" (*Persuasive Games* 37).

This is made absolutely clear when Jack finally confronts Andrew Ryan, and suddenly the game shifts and robs the player of any control over Jack's actions as Ryan uses the "Would you kindly?" command again and again to make Jack sit, stand, run, turn, and stop—almost doglike—according to Ryan's will. Because the game never shifts out of first person view, the player cannot help but relate to Jack's experience, his fear, and his sudden helplessness. After all, they have become so accustomed to controlling Jack by this point in the game that the sudden inability to control his actions is jarring, unsettling, and even disturbing, particularly when Ryan gives Jack the order to kill him. There is no alternative (aside from switching the game off), no control, no way out of this: according to the narrative, both the player and Jack have to watch helplessly as Jack's hands act to brutally murder Ryan right before our eyes. Neither the game nor Ryan give the choice of refusing to kill him. And the reality is that most video games are

similar in this regard: in order to progress in the game and its narrative, the player must perform an action whether they want to or not; the only alternative is to not play at all.

      Because (at least with quality video games) the desire to play through a narrative to reach the end and discover the dénouement is so strong, players are driven to endure hardships along the way. The players often share these hardships with the characters they portray, and according to the narrative of the games and their diegetic worlds, the player becomes empathetic with the plight of the character. This is particularly true when a character—and by extension, the player—is robbed of movement, control, and freedom, causing the player to experience the same feeling of helplessness that the character feels, and thereby connecting the player more with the story than would be possible with any other medium.

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