VIDEO GAMES, COLONIALISM, AND THEATER: THE NATURE OF IDEOLOGY IN ENDLESS AND NARRATIVE GAMES

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

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We, Caroline Kibby[1] and Gianluca Percovich[2], certify that all research compliance requirements related to this Undergraduate Research Scholars thesis have been addressed with my Research Faculty Advisor prior to the collection of any data used in this final thesis submission.

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ABSTRACT

Video Games, Colonialism, and Theater: The Nature of Ideology in Endless and Narrative Games

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Despite the rapidly growing popularity of video games, their ideology remains a disputed and controversial topic. This paper examines several influential games through postcolonial and Brechtian lenses, in order to provide a new methodology by which to analyze the ways in which specific sub-genres of games engage with player autonomy and inevitably fail to meaningfully allow player manipulation beyond the scope of coded interactions.

The first section discusses "endless" games (such as *Animal Crossing*, *Minecraft*, and *The Sims*), which represent themselves as good-natured fun with no ideological commitments. We find that these games encourage and often require the player to engage in behaviors that colonize the game's virtual world in pursuit of this fun. These games purport to give the player limitless freedom and tools to express themselves creatively, but in the end the player's only choice is to what extent they appropriate and utilize the world around them.

The second section examines narrative games, like *Pathologic* and the *Mass Effect* series, comparing the experiences they engender to theater, but arguing that they are also specific to

video games and irreplicable in other media. These games allow the player to behave as the audience, actors, director, and playwright of a digital theatrical production, but the player is always limited in their choices to those paths of action which the game's designers lay out for them. Narrative games then find themselves aligning with Bertolt Brecht's theory of alienation making the audience aware of the artifice of the theatric-ludic experiences and thus creating conclusions that otherwise could not exist without awareness of the medium.

Ultimately, this thesis examines the nature of games as fundamentally hyper-constructed experiences, whether they are procedurally constructed or highly scripted. Both genres showcase how games have the potential to prompt serious shifts in consciousness, notably as Brecht hoped his theater would.

DEDICATION

We dedicate this work to our cat, Sprite Cranberry, who comforted us with purring, encouraged

us with meows, and demanded regular writing breaks without quarter.

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INTRODUCTION

Games hearken back to many areas and time periods of cultural thought, and they do so without simply aping other forms. Games borrow and steal from other forms and create something wholly unique by allowing the audience to impact the narrative. They are not the only form that relates to theater or a colonialist mindset, but they are the only form that forces players to participate actively in the game's ideology, implicit or explicit. Games give players the autonomy to become willing accomplices, regardless of the autonomy's balance between choice, agency, and freedom. No matter what, the game itself determines the player's mindset—even if a player's mindset opposes the one expected of the audience, their starting point is still the game.

Our understanding of autonomous participation in games and its relations to the ways endless and narrative games operate as ideological frameworks is meant to serve as a future method of analysis that can be applied to various other genres of interactive media, and can be synthesized to further understand the ways that player autonomy manifests in relation to varying cultural and political mindsets. Games manipulate player autonomy in ways that can pull the player out of the experience or draw them in, and the ways that genre manipulate that immersion is a powerful tool to project, purposefully or not, a particular mindset or understanding.

The player's overabundance of autonomy in endless games does not leave the player free to exist in a game without ideology; instead, the player acts out the ideology of the game, which is similar to European imperialism and colonialism. This colonialist mindset is not necessarily the only one imposed on players of endless games, but it is unavoidable when interacting with an endless game's structure and systems. These systems come from game designers inspired (or at least influenced) by western literature and other media; thus, endless games have a cultural

ancestry that creates a gravity from which few games escape. So, while endless games grant the player a fountain of freedom, they do so in the ways that historic colonizing art forms have: at the expense of everything other than the player themself. However, this Eurocentric viewpoint is not alone, nor does it stand as a monolith.

Narrative style games appear to have a similar issue. They create worlds in which players have little autonomy, embodying traditional characters of theater and film going through the motions of a plot—but this is not inescapable. The distinction between endless and narrative games comes from the influence of time. While narrative games still sometimes find themselves the grift in the ideological door-to-door salesperson's briefcase, they have had the benefit of decades of development and evolution to refine a nuanced theatrical mindset. On the other hand, endless games are a relatively more recent genre, and the most current endless titles continue to borrow heavily from the systems and aesthetics of their far more imperialist and colonialist ancestors. Narrative games have had the opportunity to evolve from linear narrative forms, but the ancestors of endless games are far more removed. They grow from Kriegspiel, a German style of wargame meant to train the military aristocracy, but this relationship is more indirect than that between narrative games and narrative literature.

Games, then, are not necessarily tied to a particular political viewpoint based on genre convention. Instead, some genres lend themselves to certain viewpoints and must be managed accordingly within the game's design and autonomy. By manipulating agency, choice, and freedom in ways that do not place the benefit of the player as the detriment of another force in the game (whether it be other characters, the setting, or other players), designers can adjust how the player impacts and interacts with the game's world. Otherwise, games can fall into the trap of reproducing colonialist ideology.

Games are not slaves to their mechanisms and management of autonomy; rather, they are the product of these systems in conjunction. The ways that creators juggle the ancestry of the modern game can create ideologies: utopic or dystopic. They can create games that seek to engage with that history, address the past issues to move beyond them, or make games that, by saying nothing, endorse past mistakes. Every aspect of a game is chosen, whether deliberately or not, so games showcase both the ideology of those who make them and the ideology they wish others to have.

This thesis will seek to evaluate games' agencies by two distinct lenses. Firstly, by analyzing the colonial conditions of games such as *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* and the ways the coloniality of that game and games like it interact with other experiences both in reality and in fiction. Secondly, by evaluating multiple narrative games and the ways games relate to theater, ranging from analyses of physical gaming experiences and the early modern theater alongside a discussion of the Brechtian experience in *Pathologic*. By approaching analysis of the genre of games in these ways we seek to create an understanding as to the various capabilities of the ways games create autonomy and manage player expectations of their potential for choice. While the creation and use of our methodology is shared and the introduction and conclusion of this thesis were both collaboratively created, the first section was solely authored by Caroline Kibby[1] and the second by Gianluca Percovich[2].

1.   "ENDLESS" GAMES AS COLONIZING FORCES OF DIGITAL SPACES

1.1   Endless Games and Agency

"Endless" games are, simply, exactly that: games without an end. They overlap with the idea of the "sandbox" game; that is, a "virtual environment or play space in which people can try on different roles and imaginary quests can be undertaken—a place to play, somewhat as young children do, rather than a 'game' to play" (Adams 3). These games can't be "won," in the same manner that a child cannot "win" at playing in a sandbox—players play these games not to achieve victory, but rather to explore the game's virtual sandbox, free to do whatever they want. In many cases, endless games seem to be without ideology or agenda; parents often perceive this as a selling point for the many endless games targeted towards children. However, this apparent lack of ideology/agenda can be deceptive. While endless games purport to offer the player limitless freedom, this freedom is in fact limited, and indeed encourages players to take actions patterned after colonizing behavior.

My primary objects of study are *Minecraft* (Mojang 2011) and the *Animal Crossing* series (Nintendo 2001-2020), specifically the most recent installment, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (2020). I've chosen these games for multiple reasons, foremost among which is their popularity. *Minecraft* is the #1 best-selling game of all time with over 200 million copies sold (Warren), and *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* is the 15th best-selling game of all time with over 31 million copies sold ("IR Information"). Secondly, *Minecraft* and *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* epitomize the genre of endless games. Both of these games encourage sandbox play,

and while there are methods of progressing through the game, neither game has a final, unchanging end state.

In a talk at the Game Developer's Conference in 2005, Satoru Iwata referred to *Animal Crossing: Wild World* as a "non-game game... a form of entertainment that really doesn't have a winner, or even a real conclusion" (Schneider). A "non-game game" acts more as a tool for self-expression through play than as a method for delivery of narrative or character development. These games may have internal goals or achievements, but encourage the player to interact with the game at their own pace and choose how they play the game.

Endless games are games which simultaneously are "non-games" and have no scripted end, or an end which doesn't function as a "real conclusion"—an end where the player doesn't stop playing (Schneider). Functionally, they are games which are programmed to have a beginning and one long, continuous middle. There may be an end, but players may ignore the end or may not even get to the end in a potentially infinite amount of play. Endless games fulfill the "desire to explore, investigate, and uncover—to walk down as many roads as possible, experiencing an infinite number of possibilities" (Allen 18).

What is most important to an endless game is the slightly oxymoronic idea of limited freedom—that is, the fundamental structure of an endless game lends itself to being a tool with which a player can do whatever they want in a structured way. Self-expression is the cornerstone of an endless game. This self-expression, though, conforms to the game's systems and rules. In *Minecraft*, players can place an infinite number of blocks, but they must interact with blocks, and not (for instance) spheres. No matter how intricately the player understands the game, they cannot craft a completely new block that doesn't exist elsewhere in the game. They are limited to what interactions are allowed by the game's code (provided that they don't modify that code).

Within the game's systems, there is an opportunity for players to endlessly rearrange the game world as they see fit. The pieces of the game, its systems and mechanics, already exist and may make one style of play easier to achieve than another, but no two players will play the same game in exactly the same way.

Some players choose to focus on a particular area of play within *Minecraft*, such as building structures or mining out underground cave systems for resources. Some choose to live simply, gathering resources by hand in a small area around their homes, while others make huge, automated resource-collection assemblies. Some play in "survival" mode, in which players have to gather the resources to make everything themselves and hostile NPCs called mobs threaten their buildings and health, and some play in "creative" mode, in which the NPCs are not hostile and the player has an infinite amount of resources with which to play and build. Some players can choose to ignore the game's typical goals in favor of, for example, creating a functional 3D graphing calculator or word processor complete with a working keyboard and mouse.

The ability to create 3D graphing calculators or a word processor wasn't part of the designers' intended goals; however, the designers put the tools and capabilities in the game which allowed players to create these vast creative projects. To explore the relationship between the game designers, the game itself, and the players, it is valuable to examine the specific subjects and subject-positions present during making and playing a game.

1.2   The Conversation Between Narrator and Audience

When a game designer or team of designers creates a work, they enshrine within that work a specific experience for players to interact with and interpret. After the game is published, it exists alone, without the designer present, and this version of the work is what the player interacts with. The player plays the game as the designer facilitated, but the designer is no longer

there to directly instruct the player what to do or how to play. In this sense, the player builds an experience conversing with themselves, using the work as a medium. The player shifts from a passive consumer, along for the ride, to working with the medium as an artist to create moments that arise from the fusion of the game's content and the player's agency.

Ian Danskin describes this process in a YouTube video in which he examines the relationship between reader, text, and author. In the video, he says the reader "converts the words [of the text] into their own set of feelings, images, and sensations, and tries to put it all back together" (Innuendo Studios), and in so doing, they remove the text from the author. The reader cannot know exactly what the author intended, and so "to make sense of [the text], they imagine why The Author [sic] would have put these words in this order, what they would have meant with this story" (Innuendo Studios). This creates within the reader's mind a construct which Danskin calls "narrator;" not a real person, but the reader's interpretation of what the author could have meant, based on the content of the text. Then, to interact with this construction of a narrator, the reader creates in their mind an imagined "audience," who reacts to the text in a way the narrator intended and wished for. The audience acts as a hypothetical addressee of the text; they are the destination for the narrator's writing act.

These concepts are similar to Barthes's Author and reader, but understood from the point of view of the person playing the game—they are a step removed. A narrator is not an Author, but instead is the Author filtered through the player's understanding of who the Author is and is supposed to be. Similarly, the audience is not Barthes's "reader," who is "that *someone* who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted" (148, emphasis original). The audience is the result of how the player of a game interprets who the "reader" is expected to be.

A clear example of the relationship between narrator and audience can be seen in video games when a player gets somewhat stuck and doesn't know how to progress. The player may wonder, "what does the game want me to do here?" "The game" in this thought is the narrator, that entity which wants the player to move through the game in a particular way to some degree. The question of "what does the game want me to do here?" can be rephrased in this manner: what does the narrator want the audience to do in this particular situation? If the player can imagine the narrator-audience interaction closely to the way the author did, they might be able to deduce the next steps to progress through the game. The narrator and audience are not impersonal origin and destination, as the scriptor and reader are in Barthes; instead, they are the result of the player's imperfect reconstruction of how they think the game is supposed to go.

Games and interactive media allow and encourage players to perform, in the game, their understanding of the relationship between audience and narrator. In no other medium is the reader/player required to physically take their chosen actions instead of just imagining them, which makes games and interactive media unique. When a reader reads a book, they imagine what is happening in the book, and in so doing construct a memory of an event they've never experienced; when a player plays a game, they can both imagine the memory and also perform the actions to create that memory directly.

1.3   Nested Goals and the Narrator-Audience Conversational Breakdown

In more linear games, the narrator-audience interaction can be clear-cut. It occurs simultaneously at many relative sizes of goals. The player must do something to get something, and most of the time the player is doing multiple things to achieve multiple goals. For example, in *Super Mario Bros*, Mario, the protagonist, must save Princess Toadstool from the antagonist,

Bowser, who kidnapped her. The player can't just immediately save the princess, though; they must instead work through several intermediate goals to get to the end.

The player wants to rescue the princess and finish the game, but the vast majority of the game consists of them not getting to fulfill that desire. Before they rescue the princess, they must fight Bowser. Several game levels (called "stages") stand in between Mario and Bowser, and the player must complete them in order, overcoming enemies that try to kill Mario. The player must also guide Mario through challenges presented by the environment itself, such as walls or pits to surmount.

Thus, when the player presses a button to make Mario jump, they are not just doing so to get over a barrier, but also as an intermediate step to achieve all the goals stated above. They're not just getting past an obstacle; they're also trying to reach the end of the level to progress to the end of the game to fight Bowser and rescue Princess Toadstool. Within this system, the narrator and audience both want the same thing: for the player to finish the game by getting past its obstacles and completing its objective.

When the player doesn't want to finish the game, the narrator-audience conversation gets more complicated and indeterminate. The game is normally an obstacle which both creates and resists the player's desire for narrative resolution and completion, but what happens when that desire is gone? What does the narrator want the audience to do in an endless game? For that matter, what does the author want the player to do? The designers of *Minecraft* may want the player to finish the game by killing the Ender Dragon, but do they want players to stop playing after that point? Do they want the player to stop playing at any point?

In *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, subsequently referred to as *AC:NH*, the player may ask Tom Nook, a travel-agent NPC who acts as a sort of mentor to the player during the early

game, "What should I do?" He guides the player on how to progress in the game, offering advice on how to fish or catch bugs or how to upgrade one's in-game house. In this dialogue, he acts as a continuous tutorial resource on how to get one's footing in the game and as an in-game stand-in for the narrator. He answers the question of "what does the game want me to do?"

Later in the game, though, when the player has done all of the actions he suggests and asks him "what should I do," he offers this piece of dialogue: "Yes, yes... that IS the question... I can't think of any more advice to give you, [player name]! You've accomplished so much! I am sure you can find your own ways of having fun and living your best life" (*Animal Crossing: New Horizons*).

Not every endless game has a textual acknowledgement of the point at which the player has completed its tasks, but all endless games have this point within them. In all endless games, at some point the narrator-audience conversation breaks down. The narrator can offer no more advice, and instead of wanting the player to progress, usually just wants the player to have fun and live their best life. The audience, a construct that exists in response to the narrator, has nothing more to respond to and thus dissolves.

At this point in an endless game, the game provides no more nested goals. The rewards for completing different parts of the game decrease or stop. In *AC:NH*, for example, the player receives a currency called Nook Miles for completing certain in-game tasks, like catching a certain number of fish, speaking with all of your animal neighbors for a certain number of days, or crafting a certain number of items. These function somewhat like achievements which reward the player with Nook Miles, a currency with which the player can purchase special items. A player may, especially at the beginning of the game, complete an in-game action like catching many fish to complete a Nook Miles achievement to get Nook Miles to spend those Miles on

something else. This system is a clear and direct example of the game giving the player positive feedback for doing tasks.

Once completed, though, the player cannot earn the same achievements again, and over time fewer and fewer achievements are available for the player to complete. After the player remodels their house 5 times, takes one photo, or collects all the game's bugs and fish, there is no textually acknowledged reason to do the tasks involved with getting those achievements anymore. Eventually, the player runs out of tasks for which they will be rewarded by the game, and thus has no in-game reason (other than earning already-abundant currency) to participate in the various minigame-like avenues of play within *AC:NH*. When a player with all achievements completed catches a fish or remodels their house, there is no larger goal into which that action is nested. Without those larger narrative goals, the player does the somewhat superfluous labor of playing a game for seemingly no reward.

1.4   The Limited Utopia of Voluntary Labor

To some extent, all labor done for the sake of a game is superfluous; indeed, Bernard Suits's definition of what a game is states that "playing a game is a voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles" (Suits 55). In endless games, players take this a step further, laboring for nothing but their own pleasure, unaided by positive feedback from the game. In this sense, endless games are not just a tool for self-expression, but they also provide a way to fulfill a desire for a kind of utopia where nothing is done except for the pleasure of doing. The player earns nothing by laboring other than the fruits of the labor itself; there is no salary to earn, no mouths to feed, and no (non-virtual) lives depend on working. In these games, there is little to no punishment for not doing labor, just as there is little to no textually recognized reward for doing labor. Players may show off their creations to other players to gain a social reward, and their

brains may get pleasure for completing tasks and making various numbers in the game go up, but the game itself offers no reinforcement for their actions.

In this relationship, games are less of a text for the player to interpret, or even a toy for the player to play with. Instead, the game is a manner of escape, one that provides the location into which to escape and the tools to make the escape pleasurable. Not only does the player visit another world, one with no requirement for labor, interpersonal interaction, or even basic human faculties like eating or sleeping, but this world is also filled with the means to make tools of labor into tools of pleasure.

However, contrary to the name of the genre, this ability to escape and explore is not and cannot be endless. Every game experience is necessarily limited by the capabilities of the game's programming. You can make an endless number of arrangements of blocks in *Minecraft*, but you cannot interact with a sphere without modifying the game's code. You cannot shoot a gun or organize a government coup in *Animal Crossing*. While these games allow a vast amount of customization, they do so within the boundaries of the game's content. The game offers the player tools for play, which are necessarily limited to what is coded into the game.

Can these games truly offer freedom when they are restricted by their programming? Before this point, I used the term "limited freedom" to describe the relationship that games have to freedom, but the concept of "freedom" has a vast number of possible definitions and interpretations, so let me be specific.

Within a game, there are always limitations on what a player can do, ranging from rules which prohibit certain actions to voluntary restrictions players put on themselves to the specific limitations that come from a game not having code to execute a certain action. Games (and especially endless games) do, however, allow a vast number of potential actions within their

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rulesets—let us call these actions the player's "possibility range," which is not infinite, but is so large as to be close to infinite. A possibility range encompasses that which a player can do in the game, considering that most players will tend towards similar actions—for example, in the original *Mass Effect* series of games, players can choose between saying/doing "good" or "bad" things, labeled "Paragon" and "Renegade," respectively. According to one designer, more than 90% of players chose the Paragon option (@ebengerjohn). Even though the game offered a large possibility range, and players were free to make the choice, the vast majority used that freedom to choose the same thing.

In endless games, the possibility range tends towards active colonization of the game's world. For example, in *AC:NH*, the player can craft items using materials gathered from their surroundings, like wood, stone, iron, and weeds. The game also allows the player to completely terraform and change the landscape of their island, removing all methods of getting these materials from it. To allow players to get the resources they need to craft items, the designers added a system called Nook Mile Islands. The player can use points earned from completing various achievements to purchase a Nook Mile Ticket, which they may then use to visit a different island full of trees, rocks, flowers, and other natural resources. The islands are generated from a set of pre-existing templates, but each island is a unique instance—once you leave an island, it is deleted, and the player can never visit that specific island again, as a new island is generated every time the player chooses to use a ticket to go to an island.

Moving from a home location to another to ransack its natural resources is a common characteristic of colonialism, but leaving the other location without being forced to do so is rarer. Nothing causes the player to leave a Nook Mile Island other than their own desires. Thus, *AC:NH* imagines the process of exploitation ending with peaceful separation—the player leaves

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the island because they want to, because they have derived all possible use from it, and because the islands are an infinite source of materials, bugs, and fish (see Figure 1.1 and Figure 1.2). There are no repercussions for leaving, no reparations to pay, no ecosystem or economy struggling to heal from devastation.

This is not a one-to-one reconstruction of colonialism as it exists in real life. It's sanitized, a utopian vision of bloodless exploitation of the "gamescape;" that is, the dynamic, virtual landscape of a video game, which is "all too often a landscape of colonization for players who would be kings" (Magnet 142). In this child-friendly colonialism, there is no need to remove the native inhabitants of the gamescape first, because they do not exist. *AC:NH* doesn't perfectly replicate colonial ideology; instead, it echoes parts of that ideology, presented in the game without context or textual commentary. This fantasy of taking control of an island, deserted or not, corresponds to the long history of such imagery in the Western imaginary, starting with *Robinson Crusoe.* Much like Crusoe, the player in *AC:NH* finds themself "the protagonist upon the shore of an isolated island, as a subject free from social determination" (Lobo 21), a position which reflects the real-life ideology of American colonialism.

Figure 1.1: A screenshot from Animal Crossing: New Horizons. It shows a player on a Nook Mile Island moments after arriving. The island is lush, green, and filled with many types of flora.

Figure 1.2: A screenshot from Animal Crossing: New Horizons. It shows a player on a Nook Mile Island which is completely barren. The plants previously present have been removed or destroyed.
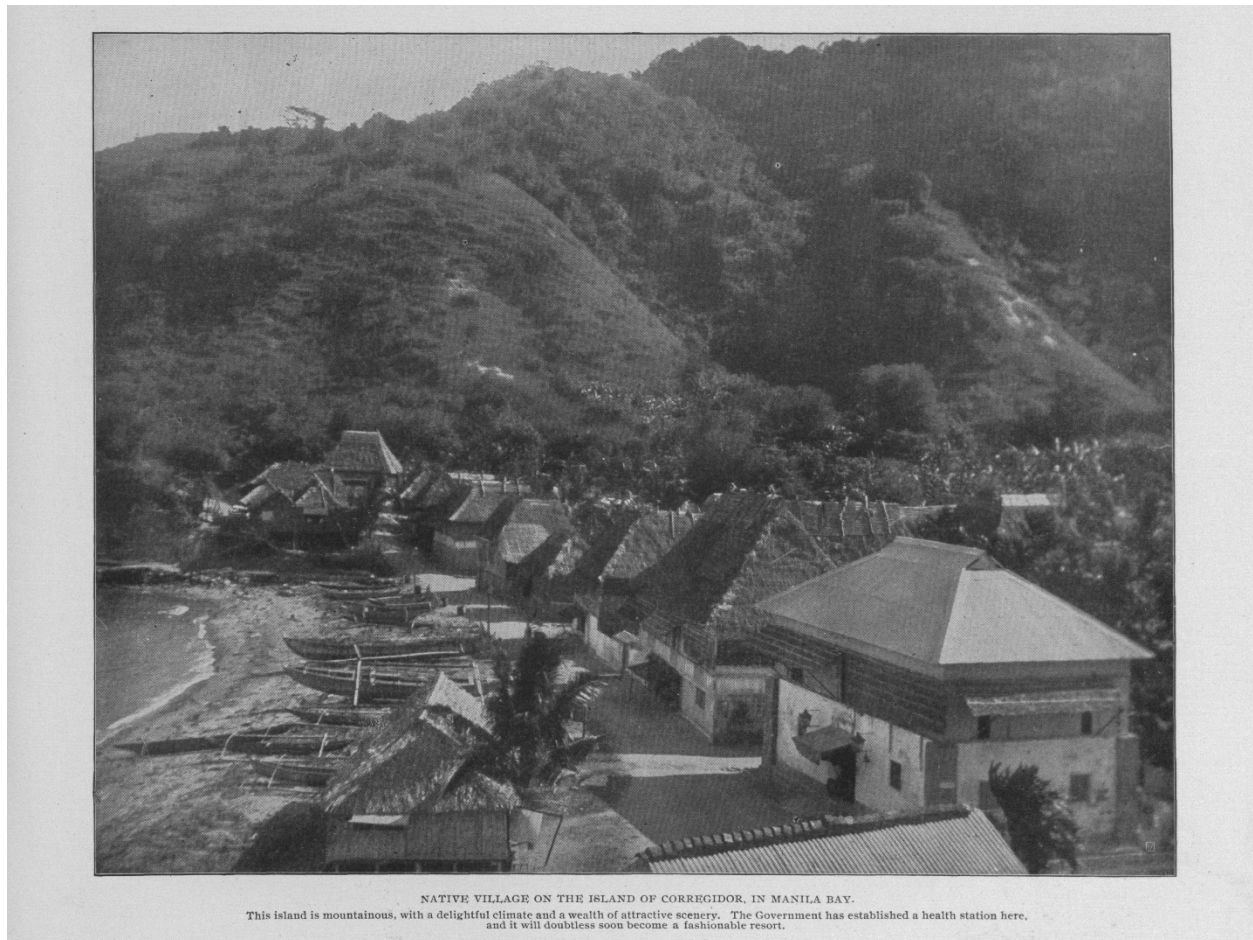
1.5   How Animal Crossing: New Horizons Emulates Real-Life Colonialism

Several comparisons between *AC:NH* and colonialism of the physical world can be found

in specifically the colonial relationship between the United States and the Philippines, from the

former's acquisition of the latter to the present day. In 1899, just a year after the US formally

acquired the Philippine Islands, the US Military commissioned a guide to several of its recent

colonial acquisitions, "to present as perfect and complete a view of the late Spanish Islands and

their people as the tourist, traveler, or pleasure seeker could obtain by visiting them in person"

(de Olivares 5).

Our Islands is filled with pictures of the islands and their inhabitants, portraying the

Philippines as a sightseer's delight. It states of one Filipino city, Malate, that "the houses... on the

water side have grounds extending to the bay... constantly washed by the surf and fanned by the

sea breezes. They present very much the appearance of our seaside resorts, with this advantage,

that while we can enjoy bathing for only a few weeks, they have salt water bathing all the year

round; and the flowers which flourish in their yards and gardens are as fresh and beautiful at one

season as at another" (571–72). These and other declarations within the text serve to entice the

reader to the beauty and ease of life in the Philippines; indeed, one letter printed in the text states

that "[t]o those desiring to get close to nature's heart, the Philippine Islands are a rare

opportunity" (762).

"Opportunity" perfectly encapsulates this text's idea of the Philippines—an aesthetic

opportunity and an economic one as well (see Figure 1.3). Similarly, the idea of the Philippines

housing "nature's heart" is a fantasy of exploitation. To the colonist, what is desirable about the

Philippine Islands is not "nature's heart," but rather what labor can be extracted from nature's

heart and what resources from nature's heart can be sold. The Philippines may "have the most

beautiful sunsets imaginable" (762), but also "in a commercial sense, they are probably worth more than any other region of the same size in the world; and their riches are practically undeveloped" (691). In *Our Islands,* the Philippines are malleable, awaiting outside influence to capitalize on the "fortunes of incalculable magnitude" available to anyone who desires to make them (692).

NATIVE VILLAGE ON THE ISLAND OF CORREGIDOR, IN MANILA BAY.
This island is mountainous, with a delightful climate and a wealth of attractive scenery. The Government has established a health station here,
and it will doubtless soon become a fashionable resort.

Figure 1.3: An image from Our Islands which praises the natural beauty and marketability of the Philippines. It is captioned: "NATIVE VILLAGE ON THE ISLAND OF CORREGIDOR, IN MANILA BAY. The island is mountainous, with a delightful climate and a wealth of attractive scenery. The Government has established a health station here, and it will doubtless soon become a fashionable resort" (727).

The promotional material for *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* echoes this perception of nature as a beautiful opportunity for exploitation. Advertisements emphasize both the island's attractiveness and its customizability, promising that in the game "you'll be met with a deserted

island positively teeming with nature's bounty" (*New Horizons Direct 2.20.2020*), and that "[p]eaceful creativity and charm await as you roll up your sleeves and make your new life whatever you want it to be" (*Your Island Escape, Your Way*).

Our Islands and *AC:NH*'s advertisements have similar forms because they also have similar functions—both of them attempt to sell the experience of living on an island, whether that experience is physical or virtual. *Our Islands* focuses more on the "immense [monetary] profit" available in the Philippines, stating that "the market is close at hand in the local demand" for lumber (de Olivares 692). Commercials for *AC:NH*, on the other hand, focus more on the personal profit of "flex[ing] your creative muscle across the island" (*New Horizons Direct 2.20.2020*), proclaiming that the player has ultimate authority—"your island, your home, your life… your way" (*Your Island, Your Life!*). Both, though, center around the reader or player's power over the physical or virtual landscape, their ability to bend the gamescape to their will for emotional or financial gain. The surrounding territory, flora, and fauna exist as a stepping-stone to be conquered on the way to happiness, whatever form that happiness takes.

Beneath the somewhat sunny exterior of the exoticization of nature, there lies more history of colonial exploitation; in 1947, the US and the Philippines signed a treaty that broadly guaranteed the US the right to construct military bases and hold military operations within the Philippines for 99 years (*Agreement*, sec.XXIX). It was amended in 1966 to shorten the term to 25 years, and after expiring in 1991, the Filipino Senate voted against renewing it (Shenon). The last of the US military personnel in the Philippines left in 1992, pursuant to the agreement's terms (Branigin).

From 1947 to 1992, the US reaped great rewards from almost unfettered military and economic access to the Philippines, resulting in a great expansion of the Filipino sugar trade,

over 3 billion dollars in military equipment left in the Philippines, and thousands of "throw-away children" with American fathers and Filipino mothers (Branigin). In this sense, *AC:NH*'s Nook Mile Islands differ significantly from the US-Philippines relationship—*AC:NH* players leave their islands free of attachments, save for the resources they collected, while the US left behind billions of dollars in products, commerce, and lives in departing from the Philippines. Nook Mile Islands receive no benefit from players visiting them, but one could argue that at least the Filipino elite benefitted from their close relationship with the US—US military support in the Philippines "was… used against the internal threat to the status quo," and the agreement allowed elites to "pledge allegiance to the United States, even at the expense of Philippine sovereignty" (Shalom 11). Additionally, Nook Mile Islands have no inhabitants, while the Philippines are densely populated.

  AC:NH removes the problem of inhabited islands entirely, smoothing over how to address the real-life exploitation and genocide of native populations by not having a native population in the first place. Nothing resists the player's efforts to destroy an island's ecosystem, least of all the game—for a small fee, it even offers backup tools like shovels and axes in case the player's tools break. This, along with the deletion of islands after the player visits, absolves the player of any guilt incurred by destroying the gamescape.

  On the one hand, a real-life global superpower exploited the people and land of an island nation for military advantages and natural resources for decades, leading to social unrest, corruption among the Filipino politicians, and continued encouragement of an economy based on exporting raw goods to the US (Shalom). On the other hand, one individual digital avatar goes to a randomly-generated island to get crafting materials to make cute clothes and furniture, deleting

the island after leaving. It may seem reductive to draw parallels between the two, but the very

fact that *AC:NH* echoes parts of a real-life colonial relationship invites study and scrutiny.

AC:NH provides a clear, visceral example of going to a different place to exploit it for

resources and then returning home, but by no means is this a unique mechanic. In *Minecraft,* the

player visits cave systems, different biomes, and even two different dimensions to get resources

unavailable anywhere else. Both of these games, as well as many others, are set up so that

environmental exploitation is easy, welcomed, and rewarded both with the fruits of the

exploitation and in-game rewards like experience points and Nook Miles.

Whether the player leaves visible scars on the gamescape like the remnants of strip-

mining in *Minecraft*, or the game clears away traces of exploitation like *AC:NH*, colonialist

themes and traits seem ubiquitous across the genre of endless games. In these games, the player

has an extensive range of possibility, but little choice—one may use the game's tools to create

vast edifices to self-expression, but they *must* use those tools.

What makes these tools inherently colonial is how they enable players to make the

game's digital space into a vassal state for the player themself. Instead of one country or people

group exploiting another, the player exploits the gamescape for their own enjoyment. In the

relationship between a player and an endless game, the player assumes full power and authority,

transforming and manipulating the game to their liking.

The tools of the game form a dichotomy between that which helps the player achieve

their goals, and that which hinders it. Endless games must strike a balance in this regard,

simultaneously allowing the player to do whatever they want and also making whatever the

player wants to do difficult enough that the player feels pride when they accomplish their goals.

Thus, the game presents itself for subjugation, providing itself as an object to conquer, the tools

with which to conquer it, and also subjects to conquer—Nook Mile Islands and their flora and fauna are subjects over which the player exerts their will, even though these entities are not people.

Discourse surrounding violence in video games usually centers around violence against bodies, somewhat glossing over the violence done to the landscapes from which those bodies arise and are repressed. In cultural context, the erasure of a landscape's agency and identity stands out less than the same of a body; wounds that bleed are easier to see than those that don't.

Every decision in a game, including encouraging the player to colonize the gamescape, has to be made (consciously or unconsciously) by its designers. If designers can choose to reproduce colonial ideology and patterns of action, then they can also choose to avoid this tendency, and focus on a representation of the gamescape which does not wholly depend on the player for identity and meaning. Players and designers both must approach games and gamescapes attentively and be aware of their "ideological underpinnings so that [they] do not make precipitous suggestions as to their merit" (Magnet 157). Giving the player inexhaustible opportunities to colonize must not be the goal; instead, we must give players the option to choose different modes of interaction. We must examine the presence of colonialist axiomatics in leisure pastimes and learn from that presence, so that we may interact with and make more games that do not rely on sanded-down, glossed-over apery of some of the ugliest parts of history.

2.   GAMES AS THEATER

The production of a game's narrative is a peculiar one. Many narrative games need a script, dramatis personae, and set pieces. A director typically oversees the process, and the final product tends to have unplanned flourishes from the actors, set decorators, and the players themselves. Games are theater. We use similar language to describe both: language like acts, actors, directors, and stages—why do we not relate the media? Games and theater rely on an audience engaging with a unique performance framed by its connection to live performers, simulated or not. Games have distinctions in who the audience is, how each performance is unique, and what precisely defines a performer. Games work as theater because they work off of our expectations of the play experience and what it means to be a performer with "free" reign, but on the digital stage artistic freedom isn't for the actors.

Performance in most modern theater does not carry the same burdens of performance as described by John Austin in his text "Performative Utterances." With the key distinction being intent, as Austin notes "the uttering of the words is indeed…*the* [sic] leading incident" (6). When a character dies or is married on stage, it does not happen in a real sense (in most mainstream theatrical productions). Brechtian theater is a rejection of certain aspects of this performativity—it focuses on the societal problems and structures that lead to specific character's actions, and in so doing it shifts the focus of performativity away from actions or talk. This moves the impetus of a character's actions away from external societal pressure and toward their specific performance. *Gaming the Stage's* ending point links games and theater, but the way theater deals with performativity is highly distinct from how games deal with performativity. Indeed, when

one imagines the contemporary game the most common imaginary is that of the shooter or game about war, and how else does one perform the role of soldier without violence?

Killing a person in a video game is an entirely different process and moral quandary than actual murder. It is common sense that actions done in a video game do not impact the real world. Shooting someone in a game does not land that person in the hospital, and engaging in virtual sex acts in games is not equivalent to actual intercourse. In *Mixed Realism: Videogames and the Violence of Fiction,* Dr. Timothy Welsh notes the following:

> No matter how compelling a game world may be, the video game player is not... doing the killing, the maiming, or anything equivalent to what happens on-screen. She is playing a videogame and her in-game activities do not have the value or consequence of actual violence... Furthermore, the [player knows] this and [is] metacognitively aware of this as a condition for play. (130)

This observation cements the knowledge that a game's ludic world is distinct from the ways these actions operate in the real world. Performance in games makes other, less tangible ideas "real." While a game that involves shooting a firearm may not confer actual sharpshooting prowess, games that involve flying planes or cataloging various kinds of information do. These kinds of transferable skills are used by the US military, who have recently attempted to recruit gamers specifically due to their previous skills acquired by gaming, such as staying calm under pressure(Wheatcroft et al.). In a different field, educational games continue to prove their effectiveness at teaching concepts to players while they play (Vlachopoulos and Makri). Games can produce a version of performativity that is as Austin's text describes "there can hardly be any longer a possibility of not seeing that stating is performing an act", but this performance is hidden in many performative layers and as such the "stating" is the knowledge a player possesses

in a non-physical way (139). Theater and games are both concepts that are millennia old, as such where do the comparisons begin?

Tracking the progression and interaction between games and theater must start somewhere, and while early modern England did not invent the concept of theater it did birth some of the most canonized plays in the Western world. Those plays are tied to the games of the early modern period in unexpected ways and provide a clear connection between the world of games and of theater.

2.1 The Role-Playing Game and the Freedom of Hundred Man Hotdrops

Connecting the institutions of the early modern English theater and early tabletop games is no easy feat, but the way English theater managed audience expectations as they related to games has been examined by Dr. Gina Bloom's monograph *Gaming the Stage: Playable Media and the Rise of English Commercial Theater.* She specifically examines early board and card games in relation to early modern theater. Bloom's compelling argument links both the institutions of gaming and theater, noting that even before the early modern era "[m]edieval writers used the term *ludus* for both games and plays. And the earliest commercial theaters... were built right next to gaming establishments: some of these theaters even doubled as blood sport venues" (1). Bloom connects these institutions as they were during the early modern period; this section seeks to expand that connection to the idea of the narrative game (one with a clear beginning, middle, and end). Games, however, purport to have a unique edge over other forms the idea of player autonomy. One genre in particular that his historically found its identity in player autonomy is the table-top role-playing game, a genre birthed from the wargame which evolved into something else entirely.

Even in a genre characterized by spontaneous player choice, traditional tabletop-roleplaying games (TTRPGs) such as *Dungeons & Dragons* and *GURPS* still have many issues regarding the narrative agency or theatrical experience that games provide. Many of these issues relate to the earlier discussion of battle royale games.

If one considers role-playing games like *Dungeons & Dragons* and live-action systems like *Vampire the Masquerade,* it is not strange to make a connection between them and theater. How much of a distinction exists between improvisational theatrical experiences among the audience and scriptless narratives arising from a game's rules?

Tabletop and digital role-playing games are some of the closest games to theater as a narrative form, but they remain shackled to preconceptions over their literary significance by their position as social tools. Literary scholar Gene Doty notes in his paper "A Toss of the Dice: Writers, Readers, and Role-Playing Games" that "constraints in role-playing include the interaction among the players, the uncertainty due to neither the referee nor the players knowing exactly what will happen next" (57). While Doty likens the experience of play to reading, his description better fits the mold of the social event in which improvisational activities exist, with its distinctive formal events unlike most other forms. Typical texts can only be read or unread, but within the framework of games the methods by which play occurs change the narrative for each unique play. The concept of the social event dwells alongside both the media of theater and games because both have historically been used backdrops/pretext for social gathering as noted in Bloom's text "games such as cards, backgammon, and chess were played by seated participants… with spectators betting on the action" (12).

Role-playing games fit into a very distinct mold from their predecessors of early tabletop games. This is because they are not simply social events, because varieties of these games

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present different artistic messages not only from game system to game system, but from play experience to play experience. While certain aspects of social events linger within the prospect of playing tabletop role-playing games, they are not the central reason these games exist, as a purely social activity would possess less thematic and mechanical considerations.

Social gatherings were the crux of many early modern authorities' bans on games, showing how the gathering of people around games served as a particular point of suspicion by English and other authorities Bloom notes how in "England, a series of laws about gameplay evinced… [when] games were acceptable under particular circumstances", these games exist for the purpose of having a social gathering based around them, but the gathering's purpose is not the game but instead everything around it (34). The gathering around games in early modern England is marked by discussion of the "laws" or putting money on the line, the game is an event but it is themeless. The tabletop role-playing game is distinct in that by its very nature the game is an escape. While there are role-playing games that seek to emulate an alternate mundane version of our world the most popular game is still *Dungeons & Dragons*, a game whose central theming is unapologetically fantastical. The existence of theme changes the conceit of the game from fraternizing to magical escapism. This issue is not just tied into *Dungeons & Dragons* but into the very nature of role-playing games.

For instance, the role-playing system of *GURPS* advertises itself as themeless and able to be used in any setting. However, the ways in which *GURPS* allows players to describe characters is still highly motivated by its thematic messaging of stereotypical western heroics, with character aspects such as "beauty" existing and supposedly having an impact on play. "Beauty" was also once offered as a substitute to the typical "Charisma" stat in the official *Dungeons and Dragons* magazine *Dragon*, with appropriately sexist implementation (Peterson). The friction

between the social event and the role-playing game are inevitable because any way the game is themed changes the fundamental conceit of the social gathering.

Recent years have seen a new game-social event hybrid come into the picture; the genre known as Battle Royale. These games involve a large number of players (typically fifty or more) landing in one massive player space and battling until only one player or team remains. Battle Royales are also some of the biggest media experiences in the history of games (Slefo), digital or not, and harken back to early modern crowds gathering around tables and asking about the laws of certain variants of the genre of battle royale. Theater and Battle Royale games relate to one another in an interesting way, in that the audience narrative arises from the intermissions of both experiences or during conclusions.

Battle royale games have problems arising from narratives that only form for players after the game is played. Fights and situations that may last only seconds become greater context for more long-term descriptions by the players of their battles and plights through the game. The action itself does not have a formal structure to it, as theater does, but instead seems to provide a kind of structure that historically was brought up by combat as a kind of fodder for more theatrical writings and experience.

Players remember games as theatrical spectacle, but unlike a theatrical emotional arc, games produce tensions that infects all players involved, the sudden relief of these tensions leads to a feeling reminiscent of a bad night of improv, with conflicts sloppily laid out and then instantly resolved. Tension is understood in this context as the rising expectations of the audience for a particular encounter to resolve in some form, whether it's in a theater watching one actor creep up to another, or in a game tracking the last member of an enemy team. In film or theater, though, tension is typically relieved by performers showing that they are safe or are

totally removed in ways that are clear to viewers (typically in the fashion of having an antagonist killed, or having a character be arrested). On the other hand, battle royale games create a different kind of relief to tension: two parties interact in the game, and one of them relieves tension instantly by losing the fight (even if after a prolonged battle).

Within this, a Brechtian framework of theatricality is revealed, where players relieve tension not to prepare themselves for the ending of the narrative as an audience, but instead players alienate themselves as audience members as Brecht describes his thoughts in "On Chinese Acting" on self-observation in the following excerpt:

> To look at himself is for the performer an artful and artistic act of self-estrangement. Any empathy on the spectator's part is thereby prevented from becoming total, that is, from being a complete self-surrender. An admirable distance from the events portrayed is achieved. This is not to say that the spectator experiences no empathy whatsoever. He feels his way into the actor as into an observer. In this manner an observing, watching attitude is cultivated. (130)

Players do so by shifting the purpose of easing tensions away from preparing for the next scene in the narrative to simply releasing the tension in the game. In this fashion, repetition through replaying the game with different players and characters creates new ordering and timing of tension throughout the various "performances" of the game, but the underlying cause of resolution remains the same: for tension to be relieved as the primary drive, and not for tension to be relieved for a different narrative reason. Working through a Brechtian framework shows how battle royale games in particular seek to create effective narrative experience by having the player aware of the game's own tricks and turns. Discussion after the game frames the narrative of the experience within the framework of theater, acts appear from the formless structure and

the repetition of different battles in the same system create familiarity between games that is disassembled when the players conclude their show and either think or discuss the ways the game resolves.

Tension relief in battle royale games is also reminiscent of parabasis within Greek theater. Notably, in certain battle royale games, players enter a spectator mode when they die. Players exit the process of playing the game and enter the role of an actor addressing the audience. Certain games allow players to be revived, which allows the player to enter the role of an actor addressing other actors until they can be brought back into the game. This diegetic exit from play inescapably recalls ancient Greek theater, allowing players to engage with other players (or, for many videogame streamers, their actual audience) in ways that escape their own involvement in the game.

2.2   *Pathologic* and the Ever-Infectious Bertolt Brecht

However, this dichotomy between the aspects of role-playing games and battle royale games as social tools or narrative modes goes beyond simple either-or descriptors. Scholar Tom Bisell describes the evolution of game narrative in his book *Extra Lives* as moving through the following phases: Shooter, games in which the player overcomes a mindless obstacle; Transition, games in which the player can now make some form of narratively relevant choice, even if that choice is still a binary; and a third stage of involved ludo-narrative, in which there are more than two options. His text uses *Mass Effect,* with its numerous narrative pathways, to exemplify the third stage. His reading feels incomplete, though, because *Mass Effect* still has the player interact with a continued transition text (by Bisell's own definition), albeit one with more bells and whistles than its predecessors. Games (both digital and physical) still maintain a great inability to

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offer the mimesis of impactful player choice and freedom that aren't just expansions of the *Mass Effect* dialogue trees.

Narrative games and games that promise an "infinite narrative both have issues that run parallel runs through both genres. One with a hypothetical "infinite range of decision" (as long as the rules support them) and "narrative" video games, with their far more rigid decision-making space. Principally that both styles of games seek to surprise players with their inventiveness, whether it be clever solutions or unexpected resolutions to tension. Narratives with scripts become tricky, how does a game handle the unique ability of its medium to offer choices that meaningfully interact with the game, when the choices a player can legally make have already been accounted for? Self-interrogating a piece's medium through the use of the medium has been achieved before by Brecht's theater, but how can a game interrogate itself through its medium? In 2005 Russian studio Ice-Pick Lodge released a game that finds itself in that Brechtian mold of genre and audience analysis: *Pathologic*.

Pathologic is a role-playing game set in a small Russian town at the start of an epidemic. The player plays as one of three possible healers over the course of several days, attempting to cure the epidemic and save the town. What sets it apart from other video games (especially considering the time of its release) is its overtly theatrical bent, particularly modeled after the Brechtian style of theater. Of particular note are two types of characters in the game: the executors, creatures that seem to be a meld of the appearance of plague doctors, commedia dell'arte performers, and quarantine experts, and actors, emaciated figures with black skin or clothes and expressionless plain white masks. These characters exist diegetically within the game but do so in a way reminiscent of Brechtian theater, as these characters do not speak to the player's healer character but the player. The healer is confused by this and responds to the

characters themselves. These two kinds of performers provide a sense of humor to the game, as well as a sense of frustration in which the executors will routinely be in places that are highly dangerous and relevant to the plot, without ever really being acknowledged by the rest of the game's cast. Parabasis once again appears here, and the methods by which the executors and actors engage with the player in late-game moments deal with concepts beyond the explicit scope of the game and instead enter into more lofty philosophical discussions.

These entities within the game help to highlight the powerlessness of the player's individual action; at one point, executors appear when the player attempts to escape the plague-ridden town via train, only to be denied exit by the town guard (who suddenly appear the night the player's character planned to escape). This particular executor has no dialogue—instead, they simply stare the player down in what amounts to an actor on stage laughing at the foolish predicament of its principal character (see Figure 2.1). This mockery creates a further distance between the player and the game's story. Brecht viewed humor as a "key element to the politicization of representation" (Koutsourakis 39), which could be used to further the myopic individualistic view of the effectiveness of self-action by showing its ridiculousness. In particular, *Pathologic* creates this comedy with irony and game-based lessons. For instance, the game has multiple quests in which a player attempts to help others in what many would consider a morally upstanding way. This good behavior results in the player spending many of their valuable resources for a reward that is worth far less than the effort put in—even the moral outcome is substantially reduced in part due to the player's actions. Ludic logic usually dictates that doing the morally good thing leads to more concrete rewards, leaving the more "evil" routes as the cheap way out of the real narrative—*Pathologic* offers nothing for your reward, in a

message that says "why did you do such a thing?" playing up the farce of stopping a crucial

mission to give food to the village.

Figure 2.1: A screenshot from the game Pathologic. In it, an executor character silently mocks the player for trying to leave the town in which the game takes place.

Pathologic expounds on its Brechtian ideas of *gestus* in its use of three potential playable

characters, all of whom are characterized and made readily distinct by their social positions

within the village. These relationships and how each character's story progresses create a social

dynamic in which the social role that the character fulfills (and by extension the player can

potentially not fill or otherwise fill in a completely illogical way compared to typical ludic logic)

determines the outcome of the narrative itself.

Any outcome aside from complete success within *Pathologic* contributes to a final

complete narrative. One that can also change based on how your character responds to the text's

situations as they relate to the world outside of it. Just as the wife in Brecht's *Threepenny Opera*,

a re-imagining of an 18th century English opera structured for Brecht's political messaging, is

unaware of her groom-to-be's song's true nature, so too are the characters of Pathologic unaware of existing in a game as servants to the town's fantastical super-structure. The duality between the game and the opera goes beyond the surface. It is not just the characters' immediate condition that is paralleled but their structural woes as well. The marriage between Polly and Mack the Knife in Act I does not only deal with Polly's condition as a wife, but also her condition within her society and social strata is dealt with simultaneously. Two of the three plotlines within *Pathologic* deal with a similar issue, where the characters of the Bachelor and the Haruspex, the first two of the three playable characters, deal with the duology of progressive and traditional culture clashes (respectively). The Bachelor spends most of the game berating the townspeople for their mysticism and refusing to acknowledge the spiritual aspect of their culture, which leads to him only partially dealing with the epidemic. The Haruspex spends most of the game unable to prove himself innocent of a multitude of crimes due to his inability to escape his spiritual/medical traditions, which leads to him only partially dealing with the epidemic. Both characters work at two different cultural extremes which lead to them facing similar problems stemming from their inability to synthesize their experiences with their reality. Without working together to escape their respective realities both characters fail to learn the reality of their world. A world whose fate varies between endings, either separating itself from its spiritual core, leaving its material world, or in what may be considered the true ending. The game reveals in one of its many endings that it results from children playing with a sandcastle held up by a water bottle. *Pathologic,* much like the works of Bertolt Brecht, disguises its politics behind the obvious and behind the observation that arises from play with characters remaining perpetually unaware of their ludic condition until the Changeling, the third playable character, unifies the perspectives through engaging with the game as it is: a game. The framing of these characters'

narratives creates a Brechtian mold of theater, and *Pathologic* has created the ludic equivalent of a work like *Threepenny Opera.*

Games as Brechtian theater stands in rigid opposition to a type of literal player-as-actor situation that the Microsoft Kinect provides, as is discussed by Gina Bloom in the epilogue to *Gaming the Stage.* In the work, she presents the Kinect as an arbiter for the player's physical presence in the game, but the Kinect only does so by offering the player the role of the audience stooge in stage magic. The player is allowed to appear like part of the act, but is in reality only a prop in the performance.

Bloom interacts with this idea by creating a Kinect game, *Play the Knave* (2017), which allows players to act out a digital performance, but her execution still feels like a stepping-stone to future innovation. Even those who played/performed with her software asked why it wasn't more of a game, with "some sort of scoring mechanism, [with students] sometimes claiming that *Play the Knave* doesn't feel like a game without that" (189). Her attempt to create a means by which players can replicate the mechanisms of theater falls just a bit flat, but it seems to be a matter of player expectations for the medium itself—those who participated in Bloom and her team's work with *Play the Knave* cannot escape their expectations of what a game needs to be in order to exist as a game. Concern over attitudes of what is a game is not at the forefront of Bloom's argument—instead, her point seems to be the proposition that theater already existed as a form of interactive gaming well before the advent of VR and VR-adjacent technology. The sticking point here is Bloom's text's central claim of theater not as just play, but as interactive gaming: this idea can also be applied in reverse, but unlike Bloom's focus on immediate technologies such as VR or pre-20th century games, the idea of interactive gaming being theater offers a completely new way to understand and relate to both forms of media. As a player,

having individual freedoms and decision-making capabilities provides a more theatrical experience that is unique to playing games. Being able to personally direct your actor in the mundane and the grandiose creates a contained self-powering experience that could only be replicated with a large budget and a full theater company otherwise.

2.3   Mercy: A Hammer with Few Nails

Many titles released since the early 1990s purport to offer many pieces of meaningful player choice; in reality they tend to simply offer players prescribed paths with little action that supports the ideal of the player as an actor. Some games have proven able to allow the player to exist as more than a line reader in the plot, by allowing their actions to control the flow of narrative the way an actor can change the context of the performance and thus change the content of the narrative. *Deus Ex*, a cyberpunk narrative about superhuman government agent JC Denton attempting to deal with a plague and outside forces (such as the Illuminati), accomplishes this by having players do more than just select an option in a menu and witness the outcome of their decision pan out. Instead, *Deus Ex* requires that players attempt to manipulate the world around them through involved processes that extend beyond choosing which pre-determined plot path to choose. *Deus Ex* has moments where the player can completely change the game's outcome, but the game does not tell players that they can do so. For instance, in one pivotal scene, an ally recommends the player character kill a prisoner. The player character can kill the ally instead, fundamentally changing the story's structure and perspective, but this choice is not communicated to the player in any typical way. Instead, the prisoner begs for his life in real-time—the scene ends when either the player kills the ally or the ally kills the prisoner. Compared to more modern games, the character begging for mercy in *Deus Ex* was relatively uncommon. In many current games, enemies will use their cries to trick players into not shooting, as in *Red*

Dead Redemption 2, a game about an outlaw gang dealing with the West and their way of life dying out, showing an understanding of the efficacy of the humanized enemy AI but ultimately failing to draw the same conclusions. In *Red Dead Redemption 2* the player cannot choose to spare the life of the wounded and work with them, they can instead just let them go or risk getting shot in the back. The narrative language of violence has regressed in the near twenty years between the two titles. At its core *Red Dead Redemption 2* is a very different "narrative game" than *Deus Ex*.

The lovechild of the anti-western and the mafia movie,ba *Read Dead Redemption 2* (*RDR2*) offers a narrative journey much more akin to a film than anything else. Non-interactive cutscenes even include black bars to replicate the feeling of watching a widescreen film on your screen. At its core the narrative of *RDR2* is attempting to create the experience of a slightly interactive film, with minorly distinct scene resolutions and more scenes than a syndicated television series do with, the violence of the anti-western is juxtaposed with the interactive moments of character decisions. *RDR2* separates the scenes of mundane violence from moments of narrative interaction, leaving the game at its core indistinct from interactive films such as 2018's *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*, an interactive film released on Netflix.

The distinctions between both kinds of narrative games are those of the audience egging on actors to make a particular choice and a fully improvised play and like the improvised play there are many scripted tricks that disguise genuine audience/player agency. Many venues that offer improv nights have their actors trained to know generic tricks, such as taking long pauses and keeping a strict structure not script, to combine scenes and make use of the venue's various props and costumes. *Deus Ex* operates with the same tricks, except the language of the audience engaging with the production is further limited and those generic tricks take on larger more

intricate roles. The choices of this highly staged improv night however, still beat the choice of boilerplate ending one or two, in terms of the proposed autonomy that games uniquely offer.

Player interaction such as this is not a new kind of material. The player's role in a narrative game is similar to the audience's role in Brechtian epic theater/Lehrstücke, in which the audience is as relevant a part of the performance as the actors on stage or the production crew responsible for the play. Brechtian estrangement appears in many games lauded for their contributions to the field, such as *The Stanley Parable* and *Undertale*, both indie games whose premise stems on familiarity with game conventions and tropes. Brecht used his model for epic theater to encourage a socialist revolution by subverting the typical establishment ideas of what theater had to be, but games like those listed above use the alienation effect as described by Brecht himself in his text "On Chinese Acting." These games knowingly use the distance they create to demonstrate their messaging better. By having a distinct separation between the player and the player-character, these games become more effective artistic media by not hiding the message behind subtext, but rather just the text. Even though performing actions in the digital space is not the same as performing actions in reality, by allowing for various end-states to result from various permutations of actions, games create an art product that is unique from player to player, a unique artifact that is direct in its hand-made-ness. This, in turn, allows for players to feasibly go through one experience and discuss the experience with other players who may have done things differently, engaging with the same "readings" of the "text" of the game, even if the end-states from each game are substantially different.

This difference in end-state or play experience is distinct from its closest counterpart in other more traditional art forms: various stagings of the same show in theater. Whereas theater can re-contextualize and frame a script differently based on casting, set design, and performance,

games can completely alter the script of a player's experience. Games are not limited by a theater's venue or by licensing agreements in regard to the script. Games are also limited by the idea of theme/staging as discussed with role-playing games, with games far more unable to escape their theme's gravity. *Hamlet* staged as the tale of a fast-food junior manager is still *Hamlet,* just more comedic. *Pathologic* staged in the United States creates a wholly distinct political and ludic message over the nature of individualism. Production and casting in a game are entirely different processes than the same in theater

2.4   Media in Flux

Games as theater exist in a separate form of performativity. This performativity works apart in a simulationist perspective of games only serving to simulate some aspect of reality, real or not. But instead, games' performativity allows the player simply fills the role of an amorphous adaptable blob in art that can support any other player. As opposed to typical performance, players can simply choose to leave a game due to the lack of rigidity in a game's performativity. In truth, an actor can just as easily walk off stage during a performance, but there is no theatrical structure analogous to a player hitting a button, accessing an option screen, and exiting the situation. Games are interactive throughout the process; there is always player choice even if that choice is to leave. Theater, by technicality, has a similar approach; nothing stops an audience member from physically leaving the performance, and while games possess various ways for players to make engaging choices, theater is far more limited in its scope of direct audience interaction.

Narrative has never limited itself to any one artistic medium, and so the ways in which narrative engages with games and theater are similar but not exact. Operating within this comparative lens of games and other media offers novel methods which we can use to better

examine and understand texts—by specifically noting the comparison between theater and games, we can further understand the history of autonomy in these particular formats. Narrative games and theater are only one way to examine autonomy within the sphere of comparative study. The ways other genres of games interact with both other media and other theoretical frameworks open up an entirely new possibility space for analysis. Much in the same way Brecht opened up particular forms of theory in theater.

Brecht dealt with finding ways to discuss and subvert issues related to performance for most of his career, and his writings and ideas have proved apt to discuss why games are effective methods of creating engaging and immersive performative experiences for players. By having players become heroes or villains by willfully making choices in an art form; both because the player wants to and because the player feels it is their moral imperative to do so, games create experiences unique in their methodology and effectiveness. Games still do not create players who suddenly change because of an experience with a game (such as committing violence); rather, games have created a format of performance that is so powerful it can do things only dreamed of in theater. Games can create an experience of working under an authoritarian regime, *Papers, Please*, or can make players reconsider using violence in these kinds of performances such as in the subversive *Undertale*. Games create an ability to manipulate performance free from the constraints of the stage or screen which is built to denote a supposed freedom of perspective.

But it's hard to achieve digital freedom when all possible interactions are coded in. Games create a mirage that promises freedom, but on approach becomes something else. Something that can be aware of its failings and use that freedom that arises from self-estrangement to free its expectations of true self-made freedom.

CONCLUSION

Our research has found that while certain genres of videogames promise to offer absolute self-expression and truly impactful autonomous choices, in reality they do not fully deliver on these promises. Endless games do not give the player endless freedom, and what freedom they do offer is tempered by the necessity of performing colonizing actions to enjoy that freedom. Narrative games promise to offer the player the power to change the flow of the game, but players essentially act out roles already written for them.

These shortcomings in agency are a fundamental part of the gaming experience, existing across genre. Because the notion of games being a rigid construction is a self-evident one, it's important to note where games fail to deliver on promises such as "guilt-free territorialization" and "meaningful choice." Games, then, can preemptively counter our argument that the game itself promises agency, but does not fulfill that promise. However, even games that operate with self-awareness still fall victim to their medium's simultaneous flaw and saving grace of interactivity—games are still games and cannot avoid the ideologies they impart, intended or not.

With this paper, we hope to create a framework of analysis which can be applied generally to many games, similar to Timothy Welch's framework of "mixed realism," created in his book of the same name. We have limited our study to specific genres of games, but we hope that through our research approach, future scholars can analyze the promises of autonomy that games make and how they keep or do not keep those promises. Our research explores the relationship between a game as deliverer of ideology and player as accomplice to that ideology, but it also raises the further question of whether any game can truly grant players agency to fully explore and interact with an artificial world.

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